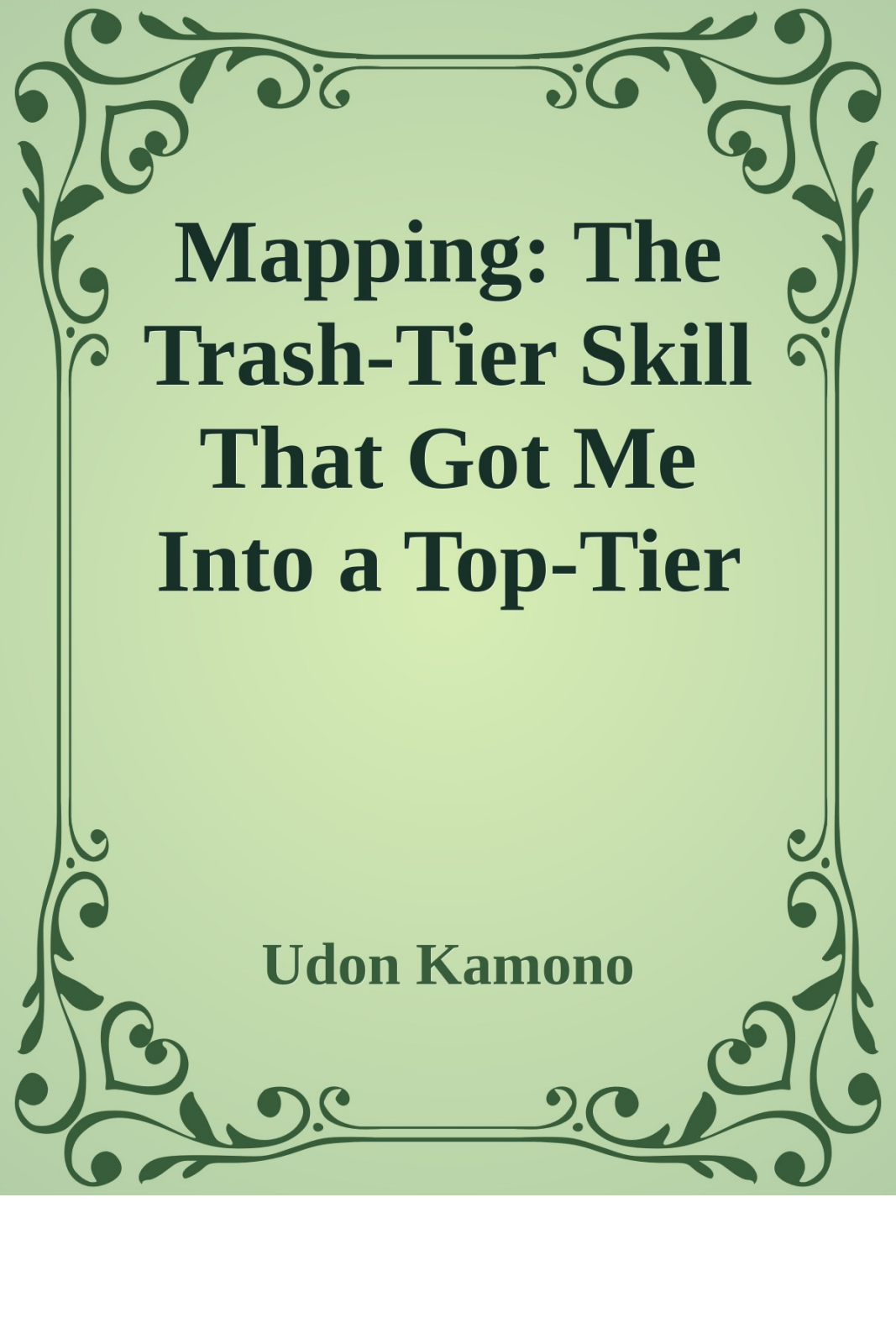


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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier

Udon Kamono

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3

III. Hitomi Shizuki

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Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

That Got Me Into a

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Ill. Hitomi Shizuki

Udon Kamono



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Return

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risk everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, who held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. They also happened to be the party that took me in. Our party, however, was currently in the midst of a grave—no, a completely ridiculous problem.

“Excuse you, Erin. Aren’t you getting a little too close to Note?”

“Am I? This was totally normal for us when we were living on floor 20.”

Both sides glared at each other. Neither was backing down.

The woman who’d spoken first was Roslia Minkgott, the Arrivers’ paladin. Her indigo hair was long and lustrous, and her eyes were a glistening red. She was extremely well endowed, and her captivating figure was topped off by her lovely face. In short, she was a beauty whose looks were virtually hand sculpted to bewitch the men of the world.

Those looks, however, were deceiving. Roslia was infamous around Puriff for seducing numerous men and breaking up their parties in the process. Nowadays she aggressively insisted that she was in love with me. But knowing her past, I didn’t really believe a word she said. It made our relationship somewhat precarious. I was as surprised as anyone when we recently hit the six-month anniversary of Roslia joining the party.

Now, as for the girl she was arguing with... that was Erin Fortlord, our mage. She had a sharp gaze and a dainty figure, and she always wore her hair in her trademark silver pigtails. A while ago, we’d gotten caught in a teleportation trap in the dungeon that left us stranded on floor 20 alone together for months. We used to clash all the time, but after overcoming that hardship together, we’d grown fairly close. She’d softened up a little—at least with me. She was still as savage as ever with Roslia.

“What’s gotten into the two of them?” asked Force.

Force Granz was our party leader. He was a swordsman and a standout fighter, even in our party of top-tier adventurers.

“Dunno...” I said with a shrug.

I was lying, of course. I knew the reason they were bickering: Erin had invited me along to go grocery shopping for the day, and Roslia had a problem with that. That was what had started all of this. The girls were fighting over me, which was way too embarrassing to admit... I mean, what if I had the wrong idea? That would be even worse.

Well, there’s no end to that spiral of negativity, so let’s just say they were fighting over me and call it a day. Either way, I couldn’t spill the beans to Force. He knew that Roslia was interested in me, but he wasn’t yet aware that Erin had developed a thing for me too. You see, Force was a bit of a lonely heart who was tormented by his inability to find love...And he was 100 percent the kind of guy to take it out on other “luckier” people. There was no telling what he’d do if he found out I had attention from *two* women.

For the record, our roles were reversed not all that long ago. I begrudged his relationship with Roslia and was ultimately the reason they split up, so... I don’t have a whole lot of room to criticize, huh? Anyway, it would only be a matter of time before he realized what was happening if Roslia and Erin kept fighting like this...

“Smells like a catfight... Neme’s got a nose for love troubles, you know!” declared a sprightly dwarf.

That was Neme Pargin, our priestess. She had the appearance of a young child, but she was actually six whole years older than me. She was also a self-proclaimed guru of all things romance.

“This does seem like trouble, Note...” added Jin, the final member of the Arrivers and the de facto party mediator. He was also my mentor and a top-tier assassin. “Those two weren’t on such bad terms before.”

Wait, was he implying this was my fault?! His voice sounded a little colder than usual... I suppose, as the party mediator, he couldn’t just look the other way when two members were fighting. He was probably especially concerned given Roslia and Erin’s rocky history.

Thus he placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “I’m counting on you.”

So he was expecting me to take care of this, huh? I wanted to explain to him that even though they were fighting over me, I personally hadn’t done anything...

“...”

But one look into his gentle yet cold eyes quashed all my objections. I had no choice. I’d now have to turn to an alleged expert for help.

“I’m counting on you, Miss Neme.”

“You’re passing this off on me?!”

She nearly jumped out of her seat when thrust into the spotlight, but I knew her one true weakness.

“Please, Miss Neme. I’m begging you.”

“Nuh-uh, no way! Getting involved in that stuff is scary!”

“That’s exactly how *I* feel. But for a mature and reliable woman like you, Miss Neme—”

“Yeah, it’s nothing! You can leave it to Neme!”

Yup, Neme was a pushover. She saluted me before running right over to Roslia and Erin.

“You know, you have a bit of a nasty streak, Note...”

Trust me, Jin. I know.

*

One way or another, the commotion that morning had settled down. It was now just after two o’clock, and the party was taking a bit of a break after lunch.

“Shall we go dungeon diving tomorrow?” Jin asked out of the blue.

I’d been waiting for him to say that, but not everyone else seemed to feel the same way. Erin flinched a little at the mere mention of the dungeon, and neither Roslia nor Neme looked particularly excited. Understandably, of course.

Erin and I had nearly died in the dungeon, and the others were forced to suffer through the grief of thinking they’d lost us. It was a harrowing ordeal for everyone, so the prospect of returning to the dungeon was indeed foreboding. It didn’t feel good to admit, but essentially, we’d only ever been playing around until now.

After the scare of nearly losing two members, there was a grim veneer to dungeon diving that hadn’t been there before. Countless adventurers had lost their lives to the dungeon, and the Arrivers now knew firsthand they weren’t exempt from that danger. We could all die in the dungeon tomorrow, or maybe the day after that. We could end up losing one of our dear friends and close comrades.

That reality fell upon each of us like a lead weight, Jin included. He knew perfectly well why everyone was getting cold feet, but this was an important crossroad for the Arrivers.

“It’s been an entire week now. If we don’t get back to it, we’re going to get rusty.”

If we stayed away from the dungeon any longer, it would likely elude us forever. Jin knew that, so he’d taken the thankless job of making such a heartless-sounding proposition to everyone.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go,” I volunteered.

I'd had a feeling this would happen, and I'd long made up my mind that I would be the first to speak up when it did. Force, Neme, and Roslia had all been spared the ordeal on floor 20; they were naturally hesitant to say anything, especially in front of me and Erin. So in order to assuage them, I made the first move.

They seemed unsure how to respond, however, and much to everyone's surprise... it was Erin who spoke up next.

"Yeah, I agree..."

Her tone was contrary to what she said, but nevertheless... she'd technically consented. I couldn't help recalling the conversation we'd had the night I finally woke up after escaping floor 20. She told me she was going to quit dungeon diving, then changed her mind after hearing I was going to stick it out. It seemed there were lingering doubts in her heart, and she was doing her best to choke them back.

"Then we should start preparing right away!" Roslia brightly volunteered next, clapping her hands together to dispel the gloomy atmosphere.

To her credit, she knew how to read a room. She normally took a certain pleasure in disrupting the peace, but she could—thankfully—be incredibly considerate at times like this. She was acting like she and Erin had never fought this morning.

"Yeah, let's do it," Force agreed.

"Let's go to the dungeon!" clamored Neme.

And with the two of them on board, the decision was final. The Arrivers would be returning to the dungeon.

"All right, then. It'll be our first excursion in a while, so we won't go too deep. Maybe just floor 10 or so," explained Jin.

That was a kindness on his part. Instead of heading straight back to floor 17 where we'd abruptly left off, we'd be warming up on a comparatively easier floor. It was a good idea.

"Floor 10, huh? That's the one with all the golems, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. The climate and terrain aren't terribly extreme, and the monsters aren't too strong either. It should be perfect," Jin confirmed.

The environment of the dungeon changed with the floor—it had everything from volcanoes to snowy mountains, swampland to floating islands. Floor 10 was a simple mechanical factory, however, so the environmental hazards there were minimal. Like Jin had said, it should be perfect for getting back into the swing of things.

*

The day we set out for floor 10, we all departed HQ in full gear. Our destination was the Dungeon of Puriff just outside of town. Perhaps it was because of the change in attitude, but something seemed different about the party.

The most striking change was Erin, who was walking at the very back of the group. She had her head hung low and was sweating profusely along her brow. She was as pale as a sheet. Worried, I slowed my pace until I fell in line beside her.

“You okay, Erin?”

“I’m fine... Don’t worry about me...”



Her reply was stiff and her voice lacked spirit. She didn't *seem* fine, which only made me worry more.

"Are you feeling bad? If so, just let Jin know and we can call off the expedition—"

"I told you I'm fine... How are you so unfazed right now, Note?"

"About what?"

"How can you stay so calm when we're about to go back to that terrible place?"

Ah, so that was what she meant. But when I stopped to think about it... she had a point. Erin and I had survived the same horrors, but I was undaunted by the idea of getting back into the dungeon. After the two months of living hell we'd been through, most people would probably do anything in their power to avoid ever going through the same thing again...

Yet there were no such thoughts in my mind. I completely understood how Erin felt; I just didn't feel the same way. Maybe it was because I simply wasn't that smart. But whatever the reason, here we were.

As I analyzed my own state of mind, Erin's wavering crimson eyes peered up at me. I placed my hand on my chest and tried explaining myself.

"It's not that I'm calm... If anything, I'm kind of excited."

"Really?"

I didn't think Erin was wrong for feeling the way she did, but I couldn't deny that I was looking forward to our excursion.

"It's been a while since we were all together like this. How could I not be?"

"Hahh... You really are a dungeon-obsessed weirdo."

"See? It's been a while since you made fun of me, too."

After our ordeal on floor 20, Erin had taken a kinder tone with me. It was rare for her to lash out or make such biting remarks anymore. When I pointed that out, however, she waved her hands in a fluster.

"N-No, I wasn't trying to make fun of you! Honestly, that's just what it seems like to me!"

Great, so she genuinely thinks I'm a dungeon-obsessed weirdo?

She was probably trying to soften the blow, but that only made it worse. I was actually kinda hurt...

"I mean, I was trying to compliment your mental fortitude!" she continued, trying to recover. "After all, you're still excited even after everything we've been through... It's like nothing shakes you. Are you some kind of monster or something?"

Well, she was doing pretty good until that last comment there. I

really did scare her deep down, didn't I? Her choice of words was rather revealing... I guess I could always count on Erin to speak her mind. It wasn't like she was trying to be mean, but sometimes being too honest was just as hurtful.

But if nothing else, I had to correct her on one point.

"Of course there are things that shake me too. Really, I consider myself rather fragile. I'm easily discouraged and tend to assume the worst... It's like my heart's made of glass."

I spent half a year wallowing in self-pity just because my childhood friend dumped me, after all. I took it pretty hard whenever Erin criticized me, too. I also got frustrated whenever my training didn't go well... I was no monster. In fact, I was all too human.

"Are you being serious right now...?"

Erin, however, just looked at me incredulously.

We'd now arrived at the ruinous dungeon entrance and made our way to the warp crystal on the first floor. Erin was in the process of connecting it to floor 10, and we all patiently waited behind her while she worked. Working with the warp crystal was normally her job as the party mage. Apparently you got the different crystals to connect to one another by fiddling with the magical energy inside of them, and once they were connected, you could travel between them as long as you'd been to the destination floor before.

I, however, was a thief and had absolutely no experience with magic. I had no idea what it really meant to "connect" the crystals. It seemed super complex to me, though Erin claimed it was fairly simple. The warp crystal system was made so any mage could use it. You didn't even have to be a mage, actually—anyone who could use spells could do it.

I thus turned to Neme, a dedicated healer, for more details. I asked if she'd ever worked with a crystal or if she could, but all she said was...

"I've never tried, but probably!"

I then tried asking Roslia, who was a paladin with a few spells up her sleeve.

"I've never tried it either. I did a little bit of dungeon diving before I joined this party, but I always left all the busywork to the menfolk, so..."

Go figure. I shouldn't have bothered asking.

Incidentally, the warp crystal on each floor of the dungeon was automatically connected back to this one at the start. There was no need to program them to return here. All you had to do was touch one and you'd be teleported back to the dungeon entrance.

Once Erin was done working her magic, Force led the way and

used the crystal first. Neme, Roslia, and Jin followed suit... but I hesitated. I stood there watching Erin as she stared at the crystal with a grim expression.

“Aren’t you going?” I asked.

“I am. I just... I thought I was ready. But now that I’m standing here, I’m scared,” she muttered as she looked down.

Months ago, I never could have imagined the assertive and confident Erin saying that. But things were different between us now. After what we’d been through together, we were a lot closer. She confided in me like she never had before. And when I reflected on our life on floor 20 together...

“If you’re that scared, do you want to hold hands when we go?”

That was what I came up with. I think we held hands at every possible opportunity back then. I guess it wasn’t *all* a living hell after all.

“Thanks, but no thanks... I don’t want to hear what Force would have to say about it. Or Roslia, for that matter,” Erin laughed, seeming to relax a little. “It’s okay. I’m fine now.”

There, she waved at me and tapped the warp crystal. I was half joking when I suggested holding hands, but I was half serious too... I stared down at my lonely right hand.

“I wonder what exactly this is...”

I didn’t have the leisure to stand around and contemplate our relationship, however. I quickly tapped the crystal myself and followed Erin.

“You’re late, Note!” Force ribbed.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, waving him off.

Now that the Arrivers were all together, we took our first steps outside of the safe zone around the warp crystal. We were officially on floor 10.

To describe it in a single phrase, it was a golem factory. There were production lines running throughout the place, creating golems that would attack adventurers on sight. The farther in you went, the stronger the golems got.

No surprise, then, that the boss on this floor was a golem too. It was a larger model that could produce smaller units itself, making it quite annoying to fight. But our goal today wasn’t to clear the floor, so we wouldn’t be going all the way to the boss room.

“Note, can you guide us to any unique golems or rainbow crystal golems if you detect them?” Jin asked.

“Sure, but why?” I asked in turn.

Unique golems were special units that didn’t come off the production lines. They often had special abilities and could be a real pain to fight because of it. The rainbow crystal golems, meanwhile,

were a mass-produced variety that was notable for their elemental magic and shining crystal bodies. They were tough opponents that inhabited the depths of the factory.

“They both have parts that fetch a pretty high price on the market,” Jin explained. “So I thought we could work on replenishing our funds a little.”

Ah, that’s right... The Arrivers took a big hit recently thanks to me and Erin...

You see, when we were stranded on floor 20, Jin hired other dungeon parties to search for us. And that came with a hefty price tag when we were talking top-tier adventuring groups. Out of the fifty or so dungeon-diving parties in Puriff, only about four were serious—and we’d hired three of them.

The Labyrinth Knights were a group that had formed from multiple parties, essentially like an alliance. They were the biggest gig in town, and the most proactive about recruitment. Their abundance of skill, manpower, and wealth made them serious contenders when it came to dungeon conquest.

Liberation was a veteran party that, rumor had it, had even challenged dungeons outside of Puriff. The deadly dangers of dungeoneering kept the median age for divers relatively low, but the members of Liberation were considerably older than your average crew—proof of their survivability.

And last but not least, there was Valkyrie. They were an odd party comprised exclusively of women. Many of them had magic-centric roles, and they were well known for dungeoneering without a dedicated healer.

The fourth serious dungeon-diving party in town was, of course, the Arrivers. That meant Jin had hired all of our best competitors to try to find me and Erin. At first he’d thought we were just somewhere on floor 17, so he’d gotten in touch with everyone he knew who could reach the floor. Hiring them for work, however, cost a fortune.

And it wasn’t just money we lost. To aid in the search, Jin had shared maps, advice, magic items, and advanced technology we’d gotten from the dungeoneering ourselves. We essentially sacrificed all of our competitive edge against our rival parties—including the well kept secret that Mapping worked inside the dungeon. It was no exaggeration to say this was a serious setback.

“I feel kind of bad. I’m sorry we made you squander so much on us,” I apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like it was your fault,” Jin said, shaking his head and then clapping his hands together. “Let’s just focus on getting our hands on some rainbow crystal golems.”

“Got it,” I replied, quickly scanning the area with Enemy Search.

And so we proceeded further into floor 10.

“A group of red golems is approaching from the right. Twelve of them,” I warned the party.

Everyone immediately moved. Roslia stood in front of Force. Jin took a step back and held his position. Erin charged her staff with magical energy as she prepared to cast a spell. Everyone then checked to make sure they were in the right place—a fitting action considering how long it had been since we fought together like this.

On floor 10, enemy golems spawned frequently. Rather than attacking with a single powerful unit, they made use of their strength in numbers. Even as we fell into formation, eight light golems were closing in behind us. It was only a matter of time before they caught up.

I made note of them and then looked ahead. Erin had just finished eliminating the red golems with a spell. Her area of effect magic was critical on floors like this where enemies appeared in groups. If we were too slow to take the golems out, more would keep coming until we were overwhelmed and overrun.

In that regard, Erin was doing well for herself today. Even though she'd seemed nervous when we first got here, she was now focused on annihilating golems before her with a glint in her eye. She looked just how she used to before the incident on floor 17. It seemed she was fine after all. I'd been worried for nothing.

“Roslia, light golems are approaching from behind. Could you take care of those? There's a group of three types in the square up ahead, too. Thirty-three units or so.”

Yeah, this floor was totally loaded with mobs. They just kept coming too, so we weren't even stopping to pick up the loot. The red golems had sellable parts, but it was more efficient to head straight for the more valuable rainbow crystal golems.

Maybe I should try to extend the range of Enemy Search a bit...

I projected Enemy Search past the kilometer range of Mapping so I could see monster presences in my head, both on and off my mental map. I kept projecting Enemy Search farther and farther this way until...

Found one.

It was pretty far away, but it was unmistakably a rainbow crystal golem. I remembered its presence from the last time we were on floor 10.

“Guys, I found a rainbow crystal golem at ten o'clock. There may be a production line in that direction. Should we head that way?”

“That's our Note!” Neme cheered, slapping my back from where she was—slung over my shoulder. “It's great to have you with us

again!”

“Yeah? I’m honestly glad to be here carrying you too, Miss Neme. Really makes me feel like I’m back in the dungeon.”

“Heeheehee, you like having Neme on top of you that much?”

“You could say that...”

Her phrasing was a little odd, but whatever. She was always saying weird stuff. I didn’t pay her any more mind as I turned to Jin for confirmation on our next move. Curiously, he was standing there with a slightly surprised, slightly hesitant look of wonder on his face.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No. It’s just that I can’t sense the golem...”

“Really? Sorry. I must be wrong.”

It was probably a different monster after all. I was relying on a memory that was several months old, so I had no doubt that Jin knew better than me. I started to search for a rainbow crystal golem a second time, but he stopped me.

“I don’t think you are, Note.”

“What do you mean?”

“You very well may have sensed one,” he explained. “Your Enemy Search might have a wider range than mine. Perhaps you’ve already surpassed me, Note.”

“I highly doubt that. I must have just been mistaken.”

“Don’t be so sure. Your Enemy Search likely improved a great deal when you were on floor 20.”

Thinking back on it, Jin was right about that much. I definitely couldn’t use Enemy Search like this before floor 20. I used to be able to tell how far away monsters were and their general threat level, but my precision had increased dramatically. I could now sense presences on a deeper, more complex level and tell how they were moving. It was almost like I could see *too* much. I might even be able to fight blindfolded now, depending on the monster. But rather than saying I saw the world differently... it was more like I’d gained a new sensory organ.

“I did rely on Enemy Search a lot on floor 20... I kept it up the entire time so that we wouldn’t run into any monsters.”

“That must have been exhausting. Like I’ve said before, arts like Enemy Search and Trap Detection can improve when you’re in danger. Since you kept them active for two whole months under such extreme circumstances, I’m sure the improvement was profound.”

“Yeah...?”

Jin’s explanation kind of made sense, but kind of didn’t. I could only give a vague reply.

I mean, even I could tell my Enemy Search had improved—considerably, even. But there was no way I’d surpassed Jin. He was

the strongest assassin I knew. The ideal assassin, even. He was unreachable. I'd never catch up to him, let alone best him at something.

“Well, I guess we'll find out when we get there...” I muttered, continuing deeper into floor 10.

Girl Snatcher vs. Black Shadow

“Do you have any plans after this?” Jin asked me on the way back from our floor 10 excursion.

In the end, the presence I’d felt was indeed a rainbow crystal golem. We defeated it, along with several others, then decided to head home since it was getting late. We’d now made our way out of the dungeon and were walking the road back to town, which was bathed in the orange light of the waning evening.

I certainly didn’t have any plans for the rest of the night. I didn’t know anyone in town outside of our party. I didn’t even have any stores I liked to visit on the regular. Thinking about it, it was actually kind of sad... I mean, the only thing I ever did was train, so I guess my lack of a social life was an inevitability. I’d have to check myself the next time I made fun of Erin or Neme.

For now, however, I turned my attention back to Jin.

“No, I’m free. Did you have something in mind?” I asked.

“Great. I was thinking we could spar. It’s been a while.”

“Sounds good!”

My heart leaped at the suggestion. It had been two long months since we last sparred. It would’ve been weird if I *wasn’t* excited about it.

“Say, Miss Neme, would you mind coming too?” I asked the girl tottering along in front of us.

She turned back and looked up at me, blinking in confusion as she asked, “How come?”

“Can I just say it’s a secret?”

“I get it! You want to fight Neme! Well, I won’t say no to a challenge!” she declared, throwing her fist at me several times like she was shadowboxing. “Neme’ll knock you out in one punch!”

Her enthusiasm was impressive, although she had the completely wrong idea. I tried setting her straight to prevent any future headaches.

“That’s not it, Miss Neme. I’ll tell you the real reason when we get there.”

“Are you... going to confess your love to me?”

“No.”

How did she manage to make the misunderstanding worse?

We then made our way to the clearing near the dungeon where Jin and I ordinarily trained. We took up our usual positions—several large steps apart from each other, eyes locked. The only thing different from normal was the presence of Neme, who glanced between us in puzzlement.

“Wh-Why am I here again?” she asked.

“I wanted you on standby for healing,” I explained.

“So it’s not a confession?!”

“I told you that already...”

Jeez, how did she still have the wrong idea? I was watching her disappointed reaction, unamused, when Jin called out to me.

“Does this mean one of us might be getting hurt?” he asked curiously.

“Well, yeah,” I replied.

“So you think you can land a blow on me now? I can’t wait to see this,” he said, his thin eyes narrowing even further as he smiled.

I had a feeling things would play out differently from what he was imagining, but keeping him in the dark might mean I could catch him off guard. I simply nodded without a word to the contrary before turning back to our healer.

“Miss Neme, you might be in danger there, so can you retreat somewhere safer away from the action?”

“Okay!”

Neme scurried off to the outskirts of the clearing. Once she was in position, I drew the dagger on my belt and readied myself. Jin responded in kind, assuming his fighting stance with a slight lean forward. Though he hadn’t drawn his weapon, he was perfectly ready for battle.

If I dropped my guard against him now for even a split second, he’d close the distance between us and settle the match. I couldn’t let my guard down at all—and I didn’t intend to.

I leaned forward like him, focusing utterly on his every movement. Jin’s first play would be to activate Shadow Runner, and I sharpened all my senses to make sure I didn’t miss it.

He showed no sign of acting yet, probably out of caution. A top-tier assassin like Jin had no earthly reason to be afraid of someone like me, but after what had happened with our Enemy Searches this morning and me asking Neme to come along... he was fairly wary. Perhaps he thought I had something up my sleeve.

Of course, that wasn’t actually the case. I hadn’t prepared some sneaky plan to win, so he had nothing to be afraid of. I was walking into this match earnestly on my own strength. I exhaled and loosened my grip on my blade—a subtle indicator I had relaxed. An experienced fighter like Jin wouldn’t fail to pick up on it.

He'd definitely notice, and he'd definitely make a move. He might even know it was subterfuge on my part, but even so, I was sure he would take the initiative. A mere feint wasn't enough to keep a man of his skill away.

That's why I was certain he would move, so I did the same.

Pseudo Shadow Runner.

“...Shadow Runner...”

My vision went black; I moved faster than my eyes could keep up with as I leaped backward. I then crouched down to avoid Jin's right hand as it reached for my neck. Even if I couldn't see, I could still follow my opponent with Enemy Search and the senses I'd trained to extremes on floor 20.

I can sense Jin...

The black shadow on my mental map trembled slightly. He was probably shocked. Shaken, even. But he didn't let that slow him down. He swiftly cast his surprise aside and moved as sharply as ever. No. His footwork, his feints, and everything else were even sharper than normal.

In contrast, the best I could do was dodge him. Enemy Search allowed me to read a target's hostility, so I knew exactly when his attacks were coming. Thanks to that, his feints didn't scare me. His footwork, however, was a different story.

I took my distance to try to escape him. When he realized what I was up to, he drew his black shortsword. He was probably switching to his personalized fighting style that made use of Mineral Shapeshifting.

That was bad news for me. He could extend and retract his blade at will, making it difficult to gauge its range. He could also control the blade as he pleased, making it impossible to read the direction of his attacks. It was no exaggeration to say this fighting style was designed to kill in close quarters.

Can I evade it?

With reckless abandon, Jin unleashed a merciless thrust. He stabbed several times at my face. Any one of those blows easily could have ended me. Honestly.

Give me a break. He's going to kill me...

As it turned out, it was a mistake to bring Neme. I wanted her on standby to help me recover from the recoil of using Pseudo Shadow Runner, but Jin took her presence as a free ticket to attack me without holding back.

His blade came for my stomach next in the form of a dagger. I twisted to avoid it as it took the form of a sword again. It then bent at a right angle, racing downward to impale one of my feet. I used

Withdraw to spring backward and save myself.

I then used the art a second and third time to put some distance between me and Jin. Like its name suggested, Mineral Shapeshifting allowed Jin to freely manipulate the shape of any metal he touched. There was no limit to the potential transformations, though he couldn't change the metal's mass or volume.

In other words, the further he sent his blade, the thinner it became. If he stretched it far enough, even someone as weak as me could snap it.

Jin thus seemed to realize that attacking me with his sword would be difficult at this distance, so he used Blink to close the gap between us. I couldn't let him get on top of me, but I had no way of fending him off when all I could do was dodge. I still hadn't learned any attack arts, meaning I didn't stand a chance against Jin in close combat. I was at a loss, but I couldn't stop moving; the second I did, it would be game over.

For now, I'd just have to stay on my toes and keep moving. I'd keep dodging until I had an opportunity to unleash an attack, as clumsy as it was. Then—

Huh?

Something suddenly yanked on my right leg. Caught off guard by the unexpected force, I fell backward, unable to brace myself for the fall.

“Oww...”

I hit the ground hard. The impact slammed the air right out of my lungs. My ribs creaked in pain. I was on my back staring up at the sunset-streaked sky dotted by dark clouds without a clue what had happened... In other words, I'd been soundly defeated.

What on earth was that?

The only thing that rose above the pain was confusion.

“Looks like I win,” said Jin, looking down over me.

I ignored him and sat up to inspect my leg. There was a loose, glossy black cord tied around my ankle... that ran across the ground and over to Jin's left foot.

“Huh?”

I still wasn't sure what was going on. I looked up at Jin, only to be met with laughter. He waved his hand, demonstrating that his elastic black dagger was remarkably similar to the cord wrapped around my ankle.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Exactly what it looks like,” Jin said, rolling up his pants leg to reveal the cord was attached to a band around his left ankle. “This is an anklet made of metal, meaning I can freely control it like this.”

The cord around my foot unwound itself and started wriggling

back to Jin. It moved almost like a vine monster.

“Isn’t that kinda unfair...?”

I knew he could control his shortsword, but I hadn’t realized that he could control metal he was touching with any part of his body. What an overpowered skill...

When Mineral Shapeshifting was first explained to me, I was only told that Jin could manipulate the shape of mineral substances like metal. I guess the joke was on me for only paying attention to his sword, but it still seemed like an awfully nasty trick.

“Perhaps. I don’t mean to sound like I’m bragging, but practically everyone falls for it the first time. It’s been my trump card for a while now. I can also use it to attack like this.”

There, the black cord stretching from his ankle flattened into the shape of a blade and swept across the ground, cutting down the grass in its wake.

“Do you have one of those on your right leg too?” I asked.

“Of course,” he replied. “My arms and waist as well.”

This was rigged! There’s no way I could’ve beaten him...

“Don’t you think your skill’s a little *too* overpowered, Jin?”

“Not really. Little tricks like this may be effective in close combat with other people, but not so much against monsters and ranged enemies. It just doesn’t have enough offensive power to be useful in the dungeon, which is inconvenient when you need a decisive blow.”

“It still seems pretty convenient to me...”

As someone with no combat abilities whatsoever, I was totally jealous of the way Jin had cleverly adapted his skill for battle. There was an insurmountable gap between us, and not being able to bridge that with my own skill hurt. Now that I knew about Jin’s trump card, I couldn’t see myself *ever* landing a blow on him. Who was I kidding? This was Jin we were talking about. He probably had another trump card or two hidden up his sleeve.

“Anyway, Miss Neme... could you make with the healing, pretty please?”

The recoil from Pseudo Shadow Runner had my muscles and joints screaming in pain. I had thought I’d be okay if I kept things short, but... Yeah, I was wrong.

Shadow Runner was powerful, even in a lesser form. The burden was too great on my untrained body. The pain alone rendered me immobile the moment I dismissed the art. At this rate, it was going to be difficult for me to master Pseudo Shadow Runner. When I used it too long, I lost consciousness like I did on floor 20. And even when I used it briefly, I was still debilitated with pain. That kind of vulnerability was fatal in real combat.

“Oh... Right!” Neme squeaked with a flinch.

It seemed she hadn't expected us to need her, but she raised her staff high when called upon. I was immediately awash in a bluish-green light.

"Are you hurt?" Jin asked.

"Not hurt exactly," I said, sitting up once the pain in my joints was gone. "It was just the recoil, you know?"

"Ah, of course. That was quite a shock, I must say. I didn't expect you to use Shadow Runner."

"Mine is slower than yours and the recoil is worse, so it's still a far inferior version."

"I don't think so. If you're that good already, you're almost there. Just keep practicing and you'll get it. You may even be faster than me one day."

"Yeah, that's not happening..."

"Really?" There, Jin sheathed his blade and offered me a hand.

"At any rate, I think it's time you start learning attack arts."

"Attack arts..."

My chest grew hot when I heard those words.

Finally...

It had been nearly a year since I joined the Arrivers. All this time, I'd been dedicated to learning arts like Enemy Search and Trap Detection... but what I'd wanted all along was combat potential. I wanted something to prove I was an adventurer and cement my role—my usefulness—in the party. I could learn all the supportive and evasive arts I wanted, but real adventurers knew their way around combat. And at long last, I was getting my wish.

It felt like I was finally taking the giant leap from rookie to full-fledged adventurer. I knew I shouldn't have been so satisfied over just that, but I couldn't help the happiness I felt.

"Thank you, Jin! Thank you so much!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I won't be the one teaching you."

"Huh?!" I unwittingly yelped in surprise.

"As you know," Jin began to explain, "your role is actually thief. So instead of learning assassin arts from me, I'd like you to learn from a fellow thief. The jobs have a lot in common, of course, but they also have their differences."

"So... someone else is going to be teaching me?"

"That's right. I've made arrangements with a well known thief in town, so you won't need to worry about finding a mentor."

"Who? Is it someone I know?"

"A young lady named Riece. You may have heard of her. She's a member of Valkyrie."

"Do you know her, Miss Neme?"

"Of course I do! Everyone knows the Valkyrie girls!"

I'd heard their party name before, sure, but I honestly didn't bother keeping track of other parties' members. Even though I'd been living in Puriff for a while now, I didn't exactly keep up on talk around town. I was kind of preoccupied with myself, you could say. I didn't have the leisure to bother with other people's business.

"So, what's she like, Miss Neme?" I asked.

"Never met her! Neme's not good with new people, you know?"

Her fist pumped in the air and her smug grin seemed contrary to what she was saying, but I had honestly kind of forgotten that Neme was painfully shy...

"She's perfectly normal, Note, so you don't need to worry. Well, more normal than any of us Arrivers, at least," Jin assured me.

"I see." I cast a glance over at the oddest Arriver of all... only to find that we were awkwardly making eye contact. "Why are you looking at me, Neme?"

"N-No reason."

The way she suddenly looked away certainly made it seem like there was a reason. Surely she didn't think *I* was the oddball here. I was absolutely confident I was more normal than she was.

"Well, if you say so," I said, turning back to Jin. "Although I really would have liked to learn from you."

"My apologies, but I'm no expert in thief arts. I'm sure Riece will be a much better teacher."

"I understand. But what would be the harm in starting with assassin arts? I always figured the two were pretty similar..."

"Assassin arts are techniques meant to kill people, so there are plenty of cases where they're unsuitable against monsters. Besides, the best way to learn arts is to put yourself in a situation where your life depends on it—and that's doubly true for assassins, who deal in death. Assassin arts are meant to be used in kill-or-be-killed situations against other people, making them considerably more difficult to pick up and train than thief arts."

"But there have to be exceptions, right? I mean, you've mastered them all."

"It's true that there are exceptions, but unfortunately, I'm not one of them."

Jin sternly shook his head at the thoughtless words I'd uttered. There was no light in his eyes, and the blithe tone was gone from his voice. He was dead serious.

"D-Does that mean..." I muttered.

Ignoring my apparent confusion, he continued, "I'm a skilled assassin for a simple reason: I'm good at killing people. I'm not the nice guy you think I am, Note. It's probably not even a stretch to say I'm the worst person in this town."

Unable to find the words to reply, I simply stood there in silence.

Jin? Killing someone? No, that's unthinkable. He's not that kind of guy. The Jin I know is trustworthy and gentle. He's...

There, it set in upon me that I truly knew nothing about my fellow party members. It wasn't just Jin. I didn't know anything about Force, Neme, or Roslia either. I couldn't tell you what anyone other than Erin was doing before they joined the Arrivers or how they'd ended up in Puriff.

That realization shook me like a punch to the gut. It was almost... lonely.

The Assignment

There are two types of people in this world: those who are punctual, and those who aren't.

I'm personally the former, but the woman I was meeting was evidently the latter. I'd been standing around waiting for half an hour already. Of course, I considered the possibility that I had the wrong place, but I'd double and triple checked the details before leaving—and Jin wasn't the kind of guy to give me the wrong information on purpose.

That meant the problem was most likely the other party, Riece of Valkyrie. Plain and simple, she was late. This was the woman who was supposed to teach me thief arts today, so I was starting to get a little antsy.

Was she irresponsible? Jin hadn't made her out to be that way, but... I was starting to doubt she was going to show up at all. Worried, I glanced around.

No one around here fits the description Jin gave me... Well, it's not like me freaking out is going to make her show up any faster. Guess I'll just have to be patient.

It was another whole hour after I had that naïve thought that Riece finally arrived.

"Heya! Sorry I'm a little late."

The woman who approached me bowed her head casually, her hands pressed together in apology. She had short, black hair and wasn't very tall. She looked like she might be about Jin's age, and she was wearing a slightly rough ensemble consisting of a thin, white blouse and brown shorts.

"A little?"

"You're a fussy one, aren't you?" she laughed, slapping my shoulder in a friendly fashion. "You oughta forgive a girl when she's late, you know? Be nice. Smile about it."

Oh, shut up. I'm not nice enough to play niceties with a woman who was an hour and a half late for our first meeting! Why are you smiling so much, anyway? You should at least act a little sorry.

Of course, I was nice enough not to say any of that out loud. Not like I was too chicken to stand my ground with a stranger, though. Nope. Definitely not.

“So you’re Riece, then?” I asked.

“Sure am! But since you’re my student, that’s Master Riece to you! Got it?”

“Hahh...”

I really wasn’t a fan of the overly energetic type... We didn’t exactly get along. I mean, we *could*, but it was exhausting. That said, I’d dealt with plenty of pushy people in my party-grubbing days, so at least I knew my way around the block on this one.

Riece, however, paid no mind to my overwhelmed silence and simply carried on: “Now, you’re the infamous Girl Snatcher, right?”

“My name is Note Athlon.”

“Yeah, the Girl Snatcher.”

“I just gave you my name, you know?”

“What’s wrong with calling you by your nickname? *Everyone* knows you as the Girl Snatcher!”

Ugh... She’s just messing with me, right? Right? What happened to courtesy? We are strangers meeting for the first time, jeez...



“Do what you want. Personally, I’d prefer you call me Note, but whatever. Now, would you mind explaining to me why you wanted to meet here?”

The arranged location was a cafe in a relatively unpopular part of Puriff. It was a good ways from HQ and across the city from the dungeon gate, so I’d never spent much time in this part of town. The whole district felt kind of deserted. There was barely a soul out on the streets, and Riece and I were the only customers here in the cafe.

“Isn’t this place perfect?” she said.

“I do like quiet places, but this is really out of the way for me.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. There are plenty of good reasons to meet here.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you see, Girl Snatcher, you’re technically a guy, so it’d be bad if I got caught with you.”

Technically? What do you mean, “technically”? I’m a grown-ass man, thank you.

Ahem. I held back my retort and instead replied, “You mean your boyfriend would be unhappy?”

“That’s not it... Wait, huh? Don’t you know about my party leader?”

“Uh, no?”

Who, exactly? I mostly kept to myself in Puriff. I was out of the gossip loop, so I barely knew anything about the other parties in town.

“Okay, lemme fill you in. Our party leader doesn’t like men. You could say she hates them,” Riece explained, linking her hands behind her head as she spoke. “She’s the daughter of this famous family of mages, but she fell for some marriage scam and ended up in bigtime debt. Now she can’t stand the thought of relationships, much less men.”

“Sounds like she had it pretty rough...”

“Well, she became an adventurer in order to pay off her debts. And that’s how Valkyrie, an adventuring party of only women, came to be.”

“Talk about initiative.”

“She’s in her late twenties, single, and she won’t hesitate to expel members who show the faintest hint of involvement with men. Honestly, it’s ridiculous.”

Yeah, it kind of was. Expulsion over *that*?

“Like, at this rate, *I’m* never gonna get married. But anyways... Jin made some deal with her for us to meet, but there’s no telling what she’ll do if she catches us together.”

“Wait, what kind of deal did Jin make?”

“Meh, it’s just kind of an extension of the search and rescue mission for Girl Snatcher and Reckless Girl. See, Valkyrie’s only ever reached as far as floor 14—which puts us behind the other serious dungeon parties—so we couldn’t actually contribute much. We felt bad about taking all that money and intel for the job in spite of that, so our party leader finally caved and agreed to help Jin out. He’s been asking for a while now, apparently.”

So that was the story. The more I heard, the more I felt for Jin. I’d put him through so much... Wait, who was “Reckless Girl”? Did she mean Erin? I was curious how she’d earned that nickname, but I chose not to ask. I had a pretty good guess anyway.

“Welp, there’s no point in hanging around here to chat. How about we get moving and get to training? You came here to learn how to fight like a thief, so I bet you’re itching to start.”

There, Riece raised her arms and stretched before downing her cup of coffee in one go. Mine was long gone. I’d been waiting an hour and half, after all.

“Then would it hurt so much to have been on time?” I couldn’t help asking.

“I said I was sorry! Here, I’ll pay for your drink as an apology.”

Riece then stood up and waved casually as she headed for the counter. I watched her go, admiring how mature she seemed in the moment.

Several seconds later, she came rushing back.

“Sorry! I forgot my wallet since I was in such a rush! Can you spot me today?”

“Hmm, so this is what we’re dealing with...”

Riece wanted to assess my combat potential before we began training, so we’d left Puriff and headed into the woods outside of town. Her idea was to test me against some wild monsters, but...

“You’re pretty weak, huh?”

“I can’t help it. I don’t know how to use any attack arts.”

I had yet to defeat a single mob. I could successfully use my evasive arts to dodge every attack that came my way, but I was extremely limited in terms of retaliating. I tried my best to fight back, but my commitment to evading kept me locked in a permanent stalemate with the monsters. Riece had had to rescue me every single time.

“Even so, Girl Snatcher. Maybe it’s because you’ve only ever trained in evasive arts, but you’re avoiding really getting into it with the monsters. Is that a bad habit? Or do you just lack the sense for combat?”

“Maybe the latter...?”

“Meh, you’re not trained enough to tell either way. Just don’t get your hopes up.”

That was a bit of a shock to hear, but I was confident things would work out if I put my mind to training. That was how I’d always managed to pull through so far. And... if I didn’t tell myself that, I wasn’t sure I could make it.

“I gotta say, though, this is pretty twisted,” Riece said before clarifying. “The way you were trained, I mean.”

“What’s so twisted about it?”

“As far as I can tell, your evasive arts are on par with mine and you’re totally lacking when it comes to offensive prowess... yet your Enemy Search is far superior to mine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it. Why is your Enemy Search so pointlessly impressive?”

Pointlessly...?

“I can’t really say,” I answered. “Maybe because I always have it active in my day-to-day life. I also had to keep it and my other arts up constantly while I was living on floor 20.”

“What?! You really keep it up all the time? Doesn’t that get exhausting? Enemy Search takes so much concentration. I’d never be able to do that. I’d rather spend that energy practicing my other attack arts instead.”

I understood her logic, but I’d only survived floor 20 because of Enemy Search. In the end, it felt like everything had worked out for the better.

“What a conundrum... I’m not sure how best to teach you about combat.”

“Well, what are the options?”

“I’m not even sure. This is an important step in determining your future as an adventurer, so it’s a big decision,” she said, pressing a hand to her chin as she hummed in thought. She looked mature, but her gestures and mannerisms made her seem younger. “Do you know what people say about thieves?”

I shook my head.

Seeing that, she continued, “Well, the commonly held belief is that thieves and assassins aren’t cut out for dungeon conquest.”

“Huh? Why is that?”

“Because the further you delve into the dungeon, the tougher the monsters get. Attacks do less damage against them, so heavy-hitting roles are preferred.”

I’d already seen that in action for myself. Erin and Force were our aces in boss fights. Their high-powered magic and ridiculous strength could cut even the toughest monsters down to size.

“That’s why us lightweight attackers like thieves and assassins aren’t very popular. Of course, that’s only when it comes to dungeons. We’re still favorites for fighting monsters on the surface and any combat against people, so lots of adventurers on the whole are practiced thieves. But as for dungeon diving, the only active assassin and thief are Jin and myself.”

So that was why Jin wanted Riece to train me. She was the only thief in Puriff who was also a dungeoneer.

“Why don’t you just teach me how you fight then, Master Riece? You can handle dungeon monsters, right?”

“I don’t think you’d be able to imitate my fighting style. It’s based around my skill.”

There, she took what looked like a perfectly ordinary knife out of her pocket. She held it between her fingers, then nimbly snapped her arm from her elbow.

An incredible sound whizzed past me. I turned to see what it was... and spotted a gaping hole in a thick tree trunk behind me.

“The details are a secret, but it’s a type of throwing skill,” Riece explained. “When I’m dungeon diving, I use it to chuck knives and bombs made by our alchemist at monsters. In other words, it won’t do you any good.”

“That sounds like a simple yet powerful way of fighting, but I’m sure you’re right. I guess skills really are everything...”

“Duh. Even Jin’s give him that shapeshifting sword and that unnatural speed of his. You not having a single combat skill is a real setback.”

“Of course it is...”

Even though Mapping was the reason I joined the Arrivers, the fact that I *only* had Mapping was holding me back. Saying it was a setback was putting it lightly.

“People normally train arts that enhance their existing skills, but that’s not gonna work for you. Or, hrm... maybe it will. Jin had you focus on learning Enemy Search to supplement Mapping, so I guess you’ve been following the textbook,” Riece mumbled in thought.

“How about I learn a bunch of arts and pick a few good ones to hone?” I suggested.

“Nah. Without the help of a skill, it’ll take you at least a month to polish an art to a usable level. It’d be better to pick selectively and focus on what you choose. The reason your Enemy Search is so much better than average is probably because of the amount of time you’ve dedicated to it. Let’s say a regular thief spends 70 percent of their time on attack arts and 30 on support; meanwhile, you threw yourself 100 percent to the latter.”

“So you’re saying it’s best to focus on a single art?”

“A *single* art is a bit extreme. But that’s basically the idea, yeah... Say, Girl Snatcher, have you ever heard people talk about the strongest person in the country?”

“No, but wouldn’t that be the commander in chief? Not that I know who that is...”

“Lots of folks think that, yeah. But I bet Force could probably beat the commander in chief. Maybe even Jin too. After all, he’s made quite a name for himself as an assassin.”

“Are Force and Jin really that strong?”

“They’re more than just strong, Girl Snatcher. Your whole party is *jacked*! It’s like you have an all-star lineup of the best of each battle style. It’s no wonder you guys are a leading dungeon party.”

Were the Arrivers that amazing? Perhaps I’d grown too used to seeing them as my companions. I’d forgotten how impressive each of them were. I knew of our party by name long before I ever joined or even had any interest in dungeon diving myself. Its members *had* to be amazing.

So... what the hell was some chump like me doing with them? When I stopped to think about it, it really was strange.

“Well, then who *is* the strongest person in the country?” I asked Riece.

“Oh, right, let’s get back to that. They say the strongest person around is a certain hitman. No one knows his identity, just his infamous nickname—the Headhunter. The Headhunter always slices off his victim’s head, no matter what.”

“What battle style does this ‘Headhunter’ use? If he’s going around beheading people, then surely he’s a master with a blade—”

“Wrong! No one knows much about him, but his handiwork indicates he isn’t actually much of a swordsman.”

“Then why—”

“It’s because no one can detect the Headhunter. His Stealth is so good that no one’s ever seen him or been able to track him down. He’s an assassin who only shows up right before he’s about to cut your head off!”

Stealth, huh?

I’d spent plenty of time practicing Stealth, so I knew firsthand just how powerful it was—which wasn’t very. It couldn’t fool all monsters, and your position was given away the moment you attacked. As such, Riece’s story was a little hard to believe.

“Does this guy really exist? A killer no one can detect... sounds like an urban legend.”

“I know it sounds that way, but the Headhunter’s legit. He’s killed a ton of people, and he always sends a death threat to their targets first. That’s probably the most definitive proof he’s real.”

“Isn’t it kind of counterproductive for an assassin to send a warning in advance?”

“Even so, the Headhunter always gets his victim! That’s why he’s considered the strongest person around. Even Force or Jin would be powerless against an enemy they never saw coming.”

“By that logic, isn’t the Headhunter unbeatable?”

“Exactly! He’s, like, practically invincible. I know I wouldn’t fight him—I don’t wanna die! It’s too bad, really. If only I had a crazy strong stealth skill instead of Major Throwing Mastery, maybe I could’ve been the strongest...”

“So your skill is Major Throwing Mastery, huh?”

“Ah, crap, now I’ve done it! That’s supposed to be a secret, okay?! If you tell anyone, I might *accidentally* snipe you with a knife,” she said with a wink.

That was an awfully violent thing to say with such a playful gesture... In fact, that was a downright threat!

“I already figured it was something along those lines,” I assured her. “And if it didn’t take me that long to find out about it, I’m sure I’m not the only person you’ve spilled the beans to.”

“I’m not that stupid! *Anyway*, what I was trying to say was that you should think long and hard about how you want to fight as a thief. You could end up a giant badass like the Headhunter, or just part of the rabble—the possibilities are endless!”

“That was a pretty fine way to recover from a blunder like that...”

“I told you I’m not stupid!”

“So, how do you think I should fight?”

“Well...”

“Still don’t know, huh?”

“Bingo!”

Wait, “Bingo”? What’s she being all smug for?

“Doesn’t that mean we’re not getting anywhere with training today?”

“Well, uh... If you’re okay with off-the-cuff training, why don’t we start with Critical? It’s powerful and isn’t too hard to pick up.”

“This is all kinda slapdash, isn’t it...?”

Was I really going to be okay with this woman as my mentor? I was starting to have my doubts.

*

Two days after my first meeting with Riece, the Arrivers rallied for another attempt at floor 17. It had now been two long months since Erin and I went through hell down there. This trip wasn’t going to be a warm-up excursion like the golem farm. The Arrivers were back in business, and we were aiming to clear the floor.

I could see the vast blue expanse through my wind-ruffled bangs. I lowered my gaze a little and stared at the countless islands floating in the endless sky before us. They were all connected by bridges or floating stepping stones, and we were currently crossing the latter. That's right. This was where we'd encountered the mid-boss last time. Where Erin and I were shunted to floor 20.

There was something I had to do here today, however. Riece had assigned me a task—to figure out how I wanted to fight as a thief. The quicker I could decide how to fight monsters and assist the party, the better it would be for my training. In effect, simply having a goal would help me progress.

But, honestly, suddenly being told that wasn't at all helpful. Nevertheless, I couldn't move forward without making up my mind. Thus I was intent on watching the Arrivers fight today for ideas. I'd especially be keeping an eye on Jin, whose battle style was similar to mine.

Our strategy for the mid-boss was the same as last time: Jin would take it on solo. That meant I would have plenty of opportunity to observe him fight. In fact, this was the perfect setup. I crossed my fingers, praying I would learn something.

The battle was fierce from the outset.

Bright blue blood splattered across the stones below as a black shadow—Jin—passed over the monster, leaving a gash across its neck. Then it was the mid-boss's turn. It unleashed a powerful gust of wind, which shattered several stepping stones and sent rocky grapeshot flying toward Jin. He wasn't about to just stand there and let it hit him, however. He artfully weaved his way forward through the incoming rocks and slashed at the monster.

Speaking bluntly, this fight was insane. I thought I already knew how amazing Jin was, but he was on another level today. Perhaps it was because he was taking the mid-boss alone—or perhaps because he'd failed in doing so last time—but he was going all out right now.

The mid-boss was no match for Jin like this. This monster that surpassed humans in height, physique, and everything else... It was being overwhelmed by sheer speed. I felt like I was witnessing the realized ideal of what an assassin could be and achieve.

Honestly, Jin was nothing like this in our sparring matches. I had never realized the Arrivers' assassin held such power. Riece wasn't kidding when she'd said he was in contention for the title of the country's strongest. If anything, I was more convinced than ever that no one could beat him. He was perfection. The ideal assassin. There would never be anyone better than he was right now.

That heavy realization set in on me as I watched his majestic

figure in awe.

I'll never surpass him...

That was simple fact, pure and indisputable. I had sparred with Jin countless times since joining the Arrivers. I always lost, but I'd continued to challenge him under the assumption that I had at least a miniscule chance of victory. Oh, how mistaken I was...

I could challenge him for the rest of my days and I would never win. Our skills and our experience made a decisive difference between us. Of all the skills in existence, Shadow Runner was said to give the greatest speed boost. There was also the dark past he'd hinted at before.

And me? I had neither of those things, nor anything to make up for them. So, struggle as I might, it was inevitable. There was no way for me, humble Note Athlon, to beat Jin, the ultimate assassin.

Jin probably knew that himself. That was why he'd encouraged me to become a thief instead of an assassin. Why he was relying on another adventurer, Riece, instead of training me himself. He knew that if I chased after him and imitated his way of fighting, I would only ever amount to an inferior version of him.

Riece was aware of it too. That was why she'd grilled me about the importance of deciding on my own fighting style. She'd even brought up the Headhunter as an example to prove there was more to fighting as an assassin than just what Jin could do.

The message was loud and clear: I should choose a different path. I shouldn't aimlessly follow Jin's. The only way I could contend with him was if I found my own, if I developed my own techniques and shifted the playing field.

That said, I couldn't merely copy the Headhunter's way of fighting either. It was the same story; there was no surpassing someone on a trail they'd blazed for themselves. I couldn't compete. I didn't have a superior stealth skill, and I hadn't put in the time and effort to maximize mine through training.

At the end of the day, there were as many ways to fight as there were adventurers. Style varied from person to person, and imitating someone else made you just that. An imitation. A knock-off.

Riece had told me to think long and hard about my decision. She was right. I had to think, to discover... how to surpass Jin in my own way and be useful to the party. That was my assignment.

I had no idea what the answer would be or how to find it. Hell, I didn't know if there even was an answer. This could be it. No, this was my wall. The barrier that kept me from calling myself an adventurer or a proper Arriver...

And it towered over me darkly.

Soliciting and Shadowing

Several days had passed since our expedition on floor 17, but I'd yet to find any inspiration for my own fighting style. Not having a single means of attack as an adventurer was awful, so I spent most of my downtime practicing Critical while I searched.

I'd just finished putting in another day of training and was relaxing in the living room after my bath when someone called out to me from behind.

"Do you have a minute, Note? I'd like to ask you a favor..."

It was Erin. I turned around to see her looking down at the floor awkwardly, avoiding eye contact.

What's she acting like that for? Uh oh... I'm not sure I wanna hear whatever this "favor" is.

My gut instinct was telling me to bolt, but my conscience made me stay. I couldn't do that to Erin, so I reluctantly decided to hear her out.

"Favor?" I asked hesitantly.

"You're getting training from Riece of Valkyrie right now, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Good. I want to learn spells from another member of Valkyrie. I can't really use all that many, so I'd like to do some studying and training myself..."

There, I recalled Erin's confession on floor 20. She told me she'd stopped researching magic after she quit school—and that she felt guilty about it. This sounded like it might be her first step toward facing her past. I was delighted to hear that. I wanted to support her in any way I could. She was probably just avoiding eye contact because she was embarrassed about asking for help. Yeah, surely that was it.

"That's why I was hoping you could set things up for me. Could you ask Riece? I don't know anyone else in their party, so..."

Ah, so that's really what this was about—she wanted me to play the go-between with Valkyrie's mage. Sounded easy enough.

"Sure, I can do that. Honestly, Erin, I'm relieved. You looked so serious, I thought you were gonna ask for something hard."

"Yeah, well... Just so you know, you're not allowed to go back on your word. You can't back out of this later."

"You can count on me," I replied confidently with a thumbs up.

Yet, for some reason, Erin looked a little uneasy. That made me a little uneasy too. She hadn't asked for anything especially difficult, so what gives? I figured I might as well ask her.

"Just to be clear, Erin, are you hiding something from me?"

At that, she jolted bolt upright so fast that I could *hear* it. Come on, Erin... Way to give yourself away. Seemed my first fears were completely founded after all.

"Just be honest with me," I pleaded. "I'm still going to help you out either way."

"You'd better. It's just... The mage I want to learn from is, you know..."

"No, I don't. Who is it?"

As soon as those words left my mouth, a certain thought crossed my mind: Was the mage Erin wanted to learn from the infamous leader of Valkyrie? Riece had said she was a little strange, to put it nicely. That she hailed from some famous line of mages. I figured it was unlikely there were two top-tier mages in the same party, so surely this was the same woman Erin had in mind.

"You're talking about Valkyrie's party leader, aren't you?" I asked, somewhat resigned.

"Yes, exactly!" she confessed.

Yeah, that explained the gut aversion I'd had to this so-called favor. Erin felt bad about sending me, a man, to go parley with a misandrist mage. But she didn't need to worry so much. If I left the parleying to Riece, I wouldn't even be directly involved.

"I've heard the rumors about her, I guess, but don't sweat it. I'll get Riece to handle the negotiations, and she shouldn't have a problem with you since you're a girl too. So as long as you haven't done anything to piss her off in the past—"

I stopped mid-sentence. Erin was making a weird face, and I could see sweat rolling down her cheeks.

"C'mon, Note. Don't tell me you don't know," Force interjected in an oddly cheerful tone. He must have been eavesdropping from across the living room. "Erin once picked a fight with the leader of Valkyrie, who was famously known as the strongest mage at the time. They threw down to prove who was really the top dog in town."

"I should've known... Well, how did it go?"

"Our little fireball here won by a landslide. Her skills are second to none, after all. She was green, sure, but her superior skills allowed her to lay the ever-living smack on that lady. It was embarrassing enough as it was, but the worst part of all was what Erin said afterward. I believe it was something to the effect of, 'You lost to someone ten years your junior in magic, and you're still unmarried at

your age? How pathetic.' I believe it was? Even *I* thought it was savage."

I looked at Erin, who was now scratching at her cheek awkwardly.

"What can I say? I was young and going through a touchy period... I've repented since then."

Good grief, Erin! Are you really that heartless?!

Jeez, and now she was throwing me right into the middle of it all—a proverbial minefield of her own making. She really was heartless...

"Can't you just study with someone else?" I asked. "I know I promised to help out, but this is a lot. Even for me."

"That's why I said you couldn't go back on your word! You said you'd do it!"

I know I said it, but you didn't tell me you were trying to pull a fast one on me!

Gosh, she was *worse* than heartless. I should have known when Riece called her "Reckless Girl" that there was some sort of history between Erin and Valkyrie... Wait, who am I kidding? There was no way I could've picked up on such a subtle hint.

But this was it. I'd backed myself into a corner. I'd promised Erin I'd do this, so I just had to buck up and be a man about it. Except...

"Erin, why don't you come with me and negotiate things with Master Riece tomorrow?"

I was too scared to go alone, so I made Erin go with me. Yeah, go ahead, call me a loser.

"And... that's the gist of it."

The next day, I explained everything to Riece. Erin sat silently beside me the entire time, scrutinizing Riece's reaction.

The thief then sighed and said, "You should ask someone else."

I figured as much. Heck, even I would have turned Erin down in Riece's position.

"Please help us work something out, Master!" I begged, lowering my head. Erin followed suit.

Why was *I* kowtowing? I wasn't even really sure myself, but it was a moot point now.

"Look, I get that our leader is your only choice since the Labyrinth Knights are out of town searching for a Mapping user and Liberation doesn't have a mage, but still..."

The Labyrinth Knights had decided to recruit a member with Mapping when they learned from Jin how useful it was in the dungeon. It was part of the deal; Jin had traded them information in exchange for their help with the search and rescue mission. So, once that was all said and done, they put their dungeon-diving activities on

hold like the Arrivers once had in order to search out a new member.

As for Liberation, they were a party of long-time veterans. Each of its members had a personal wealth of experience and knowledge themselves, so they must have decided that collectively trumped any need to recruit a new member with Mapping.

“Besides, Erin challenged our leader and won, y’know?” Riece continued, still trying to refuse Erin’s rash request. “Does she *really* need to learn anything from Cathy?”

I was also curious about that.

“It’s true that I beat her. I am a better mage, of course,” Erin finally spoke up for herself. “But Cathy knows a lot more about magic than I do, thanks to all the years she’s squandered on it. She specializes in magic trickery, too. She’s got lots up her sleeve that I don’t, so there’s plenty I can learn from her petty ways.”

Wait, huh? Was Erin trying to praise her or slam her? I was really starting to worry about what would happen if she and Cathy actually met face to face again...

“Yeah, okay,” Riece said with a strained smile.

I thought *she* had quite a mouth on her at first, but in truth, she had absolutely nothing on Erin. Moreover, where was all her usual banter? It seemed like she was letting Erin talk her into this.

As I was wondering about that, Riece gestured for me to lean in.

“Don’t drag me into this crap! What am I supposed to do here?” she asked in a frantic whisper.

“I don’t know! I came to you because *I* got dragged into this crap. So, as your precious student... I’m begging you! Please do something!”

“Precious, my foot! If anything, I’m starting to regret taking you on!”

“What are you two whispering about?” Erin asked, her eyes narrowed. “Nothing fishy, I hope.”

“No, not at all. Master says she’ll handle the rest by herself,” I replied, waving my hands.

“Wait, Girl Snatcher! You can’t abandon me like this! Our fates are intertwined, remember? We swore we’d be together in our final moments!”

“Yeah, I’m quite confident I never said anything of the sort.”

“You monster!” Riece shouted as she grabbed me by the shoulders. Hard. She was really digging into me.

“You two have sure gotten close...” Erin murmured, the look in her eyes turning icy cold.

Just let me be clear for a second here. Riece and I were *not* flirting. We were genuinely arguing—and all because of a problem that Erin had caused!

Thus an entire day passed with negotiations completely stalled.

“Are you sure this is gonna work, Master...?” I asked skeptically.

“It’s our only option. I couldn’t think of anything else. Besides, the plan’s all laid out and everything. All we gotta do now is pray for a miracle,” Riece said, folding her arms with a smug nod. She then clenched a fist and raised it to the sky. “Let’s begin Operation Introduce Cathy to a Man So She’ll Chill Out and Listen to Erin!”

“Hoo boy...”

Yeah, there was no way this was gonna work.

“Let’s go over the steps one more time,” Riece said, turning to eye the building in front of us.

We were currently standing outside of the dungeon guild, which existed to serve adventurers who specialized in dungeon diving. It circulated information, sold equipment, and purchased loot. Their wholesale prices meant great rates for both buying and selling things. The guild didn’t really have much to offer top-tier parties like the Arrivers, but it was an invaluable resource for rookies and mid-grade parties who needed the support.

One of the other services the guild offered was mediation, where they would match parties looking for new members with new or freelance adventurers looking for work. Unlike adventuring on the surface, dungeon diving was notoriously deadly. So, for everyone’s safety, the guild put extra thought and care into examining and arranging parties.

For the record, I had essentially bypassed the guild altogether since the Arrivers had scouted me personally. That also spared me the paperwork, procedures, and other headaches that usually came with dungeon diving.

Now, as for why Riece and I were at the guild today... We were looking for new adventurers who wanted to try dungeon diving.

“We’re gonna catch an adventurer who’s new in town and hasn’t heard the rumors about Cathy yet. Then we’ll introduce him to her. Bam. The end.”

“That’s pretty vague as far as plans go... Why does it have to be a dungeon diver, anyway? There are plenty of other professions, you know? Why is that a requirement?”

“Tsk, tsk. You just don’t get it,” Riece scolded, wagging a finger at me as she placed her other hand on her hip. “Ladies love reliable men. It’s gotta be someone strong. And where do strong people in this town come? Here, duh.”

There, she turned and pointed to the building with the rusted blue roof—the dungeon guild.

“Wow, you actually put some thought into this...”

“What do you mean, ‘wow’?! You are so rude! I even researched

Cathy's ideal guy for this!"

"Hey, that was pretty smart. So what's her type?"

"I didn't ask her explicitly... but she seems to like older guys."

"Okay, what else?"

"The rest is just speculation on my part, but most mages seem to prefer big, beefy warrior guys. You know, like how opposites attract or whatever?"

Really? I had no idea... Was that how it worked? I'd have to ask Erin about it later. If it was true, I was in trouble since I wasn't even remotely "beefy."

Wait, why was I letting what Riece of all people said get to me? It's not like this was based on anything outside of her own opinions. She could be way, way off the mark here. Maybe I'd test and see...

"Out of curiosity, Master, what do you think thief guys are into?"

"Little girls. For sure. Thieves and assassins almost always end up, y'know, like *that*."

"Okay, now I know for sure you're just full of crap."

I was worried for nothing. Why did I believe her even for a minute? Now I just felt stupid.

Contrary to the nickname that had circulated against my will, I was *not* interested in children. Jin wasn't either. At least... I was pretty sure he wasn't?

Riece, however, seemed unhappy with my accusation. She pursed her lips and argued, "I'm pretty insightful when it comes to this stuff, I'll have you know. My predictions are surprisingly accurate."

"How accurate is 'surprisingly accurate'?"

"Hmm. I'm right... maybe 30 percent of the time?"

Just 30 percent? More like surprisingly inaccurate.

We hung around the dungeon guild for three hours, but we didn't have much luck finding anyone that met our criteria: over thirty years old, buff, relatively attractive, and new in town. There weren't many adventurers over thirty who were itching to go dungeon diving in the first place. This little mission of ours was starting to seem hopeless.

"Let's give up and broaden our search parameters a bit," I sighed.

"No way," Riece immediately objected. "Cathy's luck with men is catastrophic enough as it is. It's almost like the girl is cursed. If we give up on her here, then she really might have no hope."

"Yeah, but we're not getting any bites this way—"

As soon as I said that, a lone man who appeared to be in his late thirties caught my eye. He was standing at the counter, glancing around nervously. It must've been his first time at the guild. He was carrying a massive broadsword on his back, however, so he seemed like an experienced warrior. He wasn't too bad-looking, either... Wait,

did we just find the perfect guy?

“Master, over there!” I whispered, poking Riece.

She nodded emphatically, instinctively knowing what I was getting at. We then both broke into a dash toward the man.

“Do you need help with something, sir?” I offered.

He let out a relieved sigh and replied, “I was thinking of trying my hand at the dungeon, but I’m new in town. From what I’ve heard, this sounds like the best place to find a party. I’m just not sure this is the right counter, so I’d be grateful for your assistance if you can point me in the right direction.”

There, he bowed his head politely. There were several counters for the different services it offered, so it was hard to tell if you were in the right place at a glance.

Little did this guy know, however, that I was happier to see him than he was me. I waved Riece over with a sidelong glance. I figured she’d be better handling the negotiations from here, so I passed the baton.

“So you’re looking for a lover, huh?” Riece said nonchalantly.

The man blinked in surprise before stammering, “I-I said I was looking for a party...”

“Cool. Now, if you don’t mind me asking, are you single right now?”

“D-Does that change what counter I go to?”

“Yes, it’s a very important question.”

“I see... In that case, then no. I’m not seeing anyone at the moment.”

“So you must be looking for a lover. They say it’s better to find a wife before you find a party for life, you know?”

There, Riece turned to me smugly, as though she’d just said something brilliant. It took everything in my power not to object. I had to keep my eyes on the prize here... so I doubled down on her ridiculousness.

“That’s right. They say people are stronger when they’re in love, after all. Dungeon diving is way easier when you’ve got a special someone.”

“Is that based on personal experience?”

“Please don’t interrupt me, Master.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. Let’s get back to the important business here! I know the *perfect* gal for you, mister! I can introduce you to her right now as a special treat since you’re new in town and all!”

“U-Um, I’m still not sure that I need one, exactly...”

And so Riece continued to talk over the guy and hustle him like some shady conman.

In the end, he caved. The three of us were now headed to Valkyrie's base in order to introduce him to Cathy.

Along the way, he told us his name was Hugel and that he was an adventurer from the capital. He'd apparently traveled here to Puriff to test his strength. Too bad we caught him before he ever made it to the dungeon.

Sorry, dude. We're dragging you into our scheme now.

"I'm kind of surprised, Hugel," I said, trying to strike up a conversation. "I figured a cool, capable guy like you would have someone already."

He replied with a bitter smile, "Thank you, but I'm not sure if I should feel happy or pathetic... Embarrassed as I am to admit it, I've never had any luck with the women I fall for. Their parents always object, even when our feelings are mutual..."

Ah, so he was just unlucky, huh? I was a little relieved it wasn't anything more serious than that, and nodded accordingly. Riece then leaned in from the other side, seemingly pleased.

"Man, I thought Cathy was unlucky, but this might actually work out. Thank goodness! I might even be able to get me a boyfriend myself soon!"

The three of us continued chatting as we walked. Hugel seemed like a pretty decent guy. He had sort of a mature charm that left a real impression. Surely Cathy would like him too. It seemed like it would just be a matter of how he responded to her, but all we could do at this juncture was hope for the best.

Fortunately, according to Riece, Cathy was good-looking as long as she wore makeup. I found it incredibly curious that she specified "as long as she wore makeup," but I decided I was better off not asking.

Anyway, about ten minutes later, Valkyrie's base came into view. As we turned the corner, however, something else caught my eye. There was a slight, familiar figure... Yeah, it was her.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Neme. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, it's Note! A-And some strangers..."

Neme immediately ran over to me, but shrunk back the instant she noticed Riece and Hugel. She was as painfully shy as ever.

"I was about to go shopping..." she said quietly, leaning away as she tugged on my sleeve.

Ah, so that's what she was out doing. Valkyrie's base wasn't all that far from Arrivers HQ. Lots of dungeon-diving parties were set up on this side of town since it was convenient to the southeast gate. Bumping into Neme here wasn't anything unusual, really, but it was oh-so unfortunate...

"Pardon me, miss. Would you go out with me?"

It took me several seconds to process who even said that. I doubted my ears as I slowly turned around to see Hugel, who was on his knees in front of Neme.

“If I might be so frank as to say it, you’re my dream girl. I am unworthy to even ask, but if you would do me the honor of having dinner with me...”



I suddenly recalled what Hugel had said earlier in a different light: “Embarrassed as I am to admit it, I’ve never had any luck with the women I fall for [because they’re children]. Their parents always object, even when our feelings are mutual [because they’re children].” In other words, Hugel...

“You’re into little girls?!” Riece and I cried so loudly in unison that I think it echoed through the entire town.

“Holy crap, Master! It’s a real predator! In the flesh!”

“Ew! He even said something about ‘mutual feelings’ earlier! That’s a crime, dude! Note, this guy is seriously bad news!”

Riece and I backed off, our hands clasped in terror. Looked like she was totally wrong about thieves and assassins being into little girls. This guy was the real predator!

And poor Neme. She tried to disappear as she hid behind me, trembling. For someone so shy around strangers, she must have been absolutely mortified to have someone confess their love to her at first sight. Tears welled in her eyes as the color drained from her face.

“Wahwahwah...”

“Please, miss, just dinner...”

“Back off, predator!”

The chaos continued until the town guard came to investigate the commotion.

Once the guard was on the scene, Hugel was arrested and taken away for his persistent and overbearing proposition. Having gone through something similar once, I felt a little bad for the guy—though he really did bring it upon himself. Neme was technically an adult, so he hadn’t *actually* committed a crime here and wouldn’t be charged with anything this time... But I’m sure he had plenty to reflect on while he was sitting in his cell.

All things considered, Cathy’s luck with men really was terrible. Even things with a prospective boyfriend she’d never met were a disaster. Was she legit cursed?

*

In the end, the plan for Erin to study magic with Cathy was a disaster too. It was probably impossible from the start. Cathy resented Erin like a mortal enemy—Riece just asking about it completely flipped her out. She said getting the situation under control was a nightmare. No one was to blame, really, except for Erin’s younger self.

Riece said she’d wait for the right time to try asking again, but we didn’t have high hopes. For now, Erin would be studying by herself. It was less efficient than working under or with someone, but it was better than nothing. Probably less dangerous, too.

As for me, well... I was also having a tough time with my training. I was practicing Critical by fighting goblins in the woods, but the impatient Riece was still jumping in to save me whenever I struggled. We'd spent yet another fruitless day on practice and were now in the middle of our post-session review.

"Just how much time are you going to spend on one goblin? You didn't go in for any of the openings you could have," she scolded me, tossing up her knife and spinning it repeatedly as she complained.

"Really?" I asked, trying to catch my breath. "I thought it would just counterattack if I did that..."

"Then kill it before it can."

"But what if I mess up? It's too dangerous. We don't even have a healer out here."

"Jeez, your mindset is the real problem here. Have confidence in yourself and attack like you mean it! Be bold! I've told you that a hundred times already."

"Yes, Master..."

She may indeed have said it a hundred times at this point. It wasn't like I wasn't listening, either. I understood what she was saying, but I just couldn't see my attacks succeeding. Being bold wasn't as easy as it sounded. Riece saw right through me, though.

"You're good at dodging attacks, Girl Snatcher. Too good, even. You focus all your energy on evading, which leaves you helpless against the weakest of enemies."

"Yeah, I get that..."

"Your dodge-'em-all strategy might work in a one-on-one fight, but you're gonna be in for it when multiple monsters gang up on you in the dungeon. Besides, if you spend so much time and energy on every single fight, it's really gonna wear you down in the long run."

"Yeah..."

"You gotta take out your opponent as quickly as possible, or else you increase the burden on your entire team. You take monsters out and get back to them ASAP, got it?"

"Got it..."

"Also—"

"There's still more?! Can't we just leave it at that?"

"But you haven't learned a dang thing despite everything I've taught you! You suck!"

"That's just plain mean! What am I supposed to do?!"

"I dunno. Figure it out yourself," Riece sighed, plopping down on the ground and kicking back. "At this rate, I'm gonna bag a boyfriend before you learn a single attack art."

"Are you saying I'm *never* going to be able to fight?"

"Hey, look at you!" she said, suddenly standing up again. "If

you've got the energy to talk back to your master, maybe you need to be put in your place, huh?"

I'm sorry. It was a joke. Please don't come any closer. You're scaring me.

Riece's idea of "putting me in my place" was beating me into it. She was currently sitting cross-legged on top of me as I lay face-down in the dirt. And, like, not even in a kind of sexy way. I just wanted her to get off of me.

"I said I'm sorry. I won't do it again," I apologized for the umpteenth time.

"As long as you've learned your lesson," she said with an approving nod, though she didn't get up.

"I'm surprised, honestly. I didn't think not having a boyfriend bothered you that much."

"Seriously? Don't you think that'd bother anyone?"

"But, Master, don't you think you could win over anyone if you tried?"

"Well, you sure know how to butter a girl up. I'm actually trying pretty hard, you know?"

"Really? Then is it just that you haven't found someone you like yet?"

"God, I hate it when people say that. Crap like 'you just haven't found the right person yet.' Who says I *haven't*? What if it's just a secret, you know? We're not close enough for me to gossip about it, but people should just read between the lines!" Riece said zealously, her fists raised.

I was honestly kind of taken aback, but I still wished she'd get up already. Whenever she moved, she squished my spine a little more.

"Then... that means there is someone you like, huh? Who is it?"

"Even if there *was*, I wouldn't tell you."

"That's fair. I probably wouldn't know them anyway. I don't really know any of the adventurers in town outside of my own party. So unless it's Force or Jin—"

There, Riece suddenly toppled off of me. She'd apparently lost her balance and flopped backward, face-up on the ground. W-Was she okay? Had she hit her head? I'd never seen someone look so blatantly stricken. Even Neme was better at keeping it together.

"Is it Jin?" I couldn't help asking.

"N-N-No! Why would you think that?" she yelped.

"Is it Force, then?"

"Ew, no."

"Ah, so it's definitely Jin."

"I-Is not! I'm telling you!"

"Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

“That’s what someone says before they go blabbing! ‘This is just between us. Don’t worry.’ Yeah, right!”

“Seriously, I’m not that kind of guy. You can trust me. So, you like Jin?”

“I don’t *like* him. I just think he’s kind of nice...”

“Yeah. He’s pretty cool, isn’t he?”

“Totally. He’s so cool and kind and strong— Wait, you tricked me into saying all that!”

“Sorry. You walked right into that one, Master.”

“Shut up! Argh, whatever! Since we’re already this deep into it, do you know if he has a lover?”

Who was to say? I’d been in the party for a good while now, but I barely knew anything about anyone else’s private life. I’d never talked to Jin about romance or anything like that...

“No idea. He’s never acted like he had one, and I can’t imagine it myself, but it’s possible he’s seeing someone already.”

At that, Riece stood up and pointed an emphatic finger at me.

“Then this is an order from your master,” she declared. “Find out if Jin has a lover!”

“Isn’t that an abuse of power...?”

“...And that’s the short of it. So, do you think Jin has a girlfriend, Roslia?”

“Could I ask one thing first? Is Riece okay with you telling me that she has feelings for Jin?”

Ah, crap... I promised to keep that a secret. Whoops.

“She’d probably be pretty pissed if she found out I told you, so let’s keep that part just between us.”

“Yeah, sure. Just remind me never to share any of my secrets with you in the future. Moreover, why did you come to me about this?” Roslia asked, cocking her head. The sparkle in her big, pleading eyes really capitalized on her charm.

“I figured it’d be best to ask a professional who knows their way around men...”

“What are you saying, Note? I’m absolutely devoted to one man.”

“Huh? Who are we talking about again?”

“Me! Roslia Minkgott!”

“All joking aside, do you have any good suggestions for figuring out if Jin’s single or not?”

“There’s something I’ve always wanted to try... Ahem! I mean, yes, I have a great idea! Situations like these call for shadowing—that’s the standard!”

Really? “The standard”? She was purely motivated by her own curiosity, wasn’t she? She’d just said she’d always wanted to try it.

“You want to shadow Jin?”

“That’s right! If we tail him on his day off, we should be able to find out who he’s seeing—if anyone.”

Tailing him, huh? It wouldn’t be my proudest moment, but it did sound interesting. I had no idea what he did on his days off, so I was admittedly pretty curious myself. I’d always kind of wanted to try shadowing someone too.

“Well, it sounds fun, so why not? We happen to have tomorrow off, so we can try it then.”

“What a go-getter! Pleased to be working with you, Note!”

There, Roslia offered me her right hand. I took it and shook it firmly.

10:20 AM — Jin leaves HQ.

“You like to look the part, don’t you?” I said, side-eyeing Roslia as she scribbled in her notebook.

She was wearing a long, grey coat with a capeline hat pulled down over her sunglasses. She’d even gone to the trouble of procuring a wig to complete her disguise. It would have been perfect—if she didn’t look so suspicious, that is.

“This may be the only chance I ever get to shadow someone. I’m going to take it seriously!”

“Credit where it’s due for your enthusiasm, I guess...”

I just wish you’d change out of that outfit.

For the record, we were currently in Roslia’s room. We were kneeling on her bed, peeking out of the window as we observed Jin leave. He seemed completely unaware he was being watched as he set off down the road toward the center of town.

I then took my eyes off the window and looked around the place. Three impressions struck me. One, that I was in a girl’s room. Two, that she had some *really* expensive-looking jewelry on her vanity! And three, whoa, that her bed smelled really nice. None of it was consequential to the mission at hand, but I couldn’t help noticing. This was like uncharted territory for me.

Roslia, however, was on the ball.

“All right, let’s get to it!” she declared, practically leaping up from the bed.

I grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

“Huh? You don’t want to go?” she asked in an unusually quiet voice, seemingly surprised.

“Why don’t we stay here a little longer?”

“Ooh, so you’re finally in the mood for that!”

“In the mood for what?”

“How naughty of you to try and make me say it out loud...”

“Wait, *that’s* what you meant? No, just no! I’m saying we should give Jin a little bit of a head start.”

“So you misled an innocent young lady on purpose!”

She was just reading too much into it. I, for one, wasn’t having any naughty thoughts right now. That outfit of hers... It was just terrible. Not even a loser like me would lust after such a shady-looking figure.

“Won’t we lose sight of Jin if we don’t go after him soon?”

“That’s fine. There’s less chance of him noticing us if we’re out of sight, anyway.”

“But then we’re not really shadowing him!”

“Don’t worry. Between Enemy Search and Mapping, I can track him anywhere within a kilometer of us. We’ll tail him with that and Stealth.”

“Note... You have the perfect skillset for a stalker.”

Jeez, lay off. All thieves have arts like that. Also, Jin was really at fault here for making me learn them. It’s not like I wanted to. I am *not* a stalker.

10:40 AM — Jin enters the dungeon guild. I’m at a cafe with Note!

“Was that second part really necessary?” I asked, side-eyeing Roslia from across the table as she continued to scribble in her notebook.

“What else can I do? You won’t let me do any shadowing, so I have nothing else to write about.”

“I get that, but...”

Roslia puffed her cheeks out in a pout. Her problem, really, was with my chosen method for shadowing Jin. I wanted to play it safe and tail him from a distance via Enemy Search and Mapping. I made sure we stayed out of sight, too. Right now, we were three blocks away.

It was the perfect plan for maximum discretion, which apparently took all the fun out of it for Roslia. She’d whined this entire time that “this wasn’t shadowing at all!” She was so bored, in fact, that she’d resorted to playing footsie with me under the table. I couldn’t shake her off either, since that would negate Stealth. She’d completely entwined her feet with mine at this point.

Fortunately, Jin hadn’t noticed us following him around yet. Had he been alerted to us, I would’ve picked up on a subtle change in his hostility courtesy of Enemy Search. That hadn’t happened, however, so I was sure we were in the clear.

Ever since Jin had pointed it out, I was surprised by how much my Enemy Search had improved since my time on floor 20. I could

now confidently see everything around me even without looking directly at it. According to Riece, it was weird to keep Enemy Search active throughout your daily life... And I could kind of see her point. It wasn't like there were monsters in town. Nevertheless, it was just second nature for me now.

Jin probably didn't have his active, however, or else he would've been onto us already. I was trying to keep my and Roslia's presences concealed with my half-baked Stealth, but I knew that wouldn't be enough to hide us from Jin's Enemy Search.

"So, what's Jin doing in the dungeon guild?" Roslia asked.

"Hmm. I'm not sure. He's talking to someone," I answered honestly.

"Is it a girl?"

"I can't tell that with Enemy Search, but he's not just talking to one person. He seems to be doing the rounds."

With that news, Roslia despondently slumped over the table.

"He's probably handling some paperwork or some other business, then. How boring."

She quickly changed her tone, however, when the parfait she'd ordered came. She sat up, her eyes gleaming as she picked up her spoon. It seemed dessert mattered more than the mission all of a sudden.

1:30 PM - Lunch with Note! Jin arrives at the weapon shop.

"Shouldn't that be the other way around?" I couldn't help asking as Roslia scribbled some more in her notebook.

She quickly finished up, put her pen down, and turned to me. Food was spread out on the table before us.

"I can't help it! I nearly forgot altogether that we were shadowing someone!"

"And I said I was sorry. I know this isn't how you would've chosen to do things."

"It's fine. This is sort of fun too. It's almost like we're on a date."

"With you in that outfit? I'm just not seeing it..."

She had insisted on sticking to her "disguise" all this time. I wished she'd consider how awkward it was for me to sit down to lunch with such a suspicious character. People were staring at us funny, you know? I mean, we *looked* like we were tailing someone!

"That aside, I'm surprised you ordered such a huge steak. Didn't you just have that large parfait?"

"You know ladies have a separate stomach for dessert."

"Considering the order of operations here, doesn't that make the steak your dessert?"

Roslia ignored me, however, and proceeded to stuff her cheeks.

Well, whatever.

“So, what’s Jin doing now?”

“Looking at weapons, I guess?”

“By himself?”

“Yeah. The shopkeep is the only other person in the store with him.”

“That isn’t very interesting at all...”

“Shadowing is a game of patience. Something could happen at any time.”

“I suppose...”

3:34 PM - Shopping with Note!

“We’re not here to shop, Roslia! Take notes about the shadow mission too!”

“Sorry, the shadow mission? What are you talking about?”

“So you’re acting like it never even happened...”

“Wait, why am I dressed so suspiciously?! What am I even doing with this notebook?!”

“That’s what *I* want to know.”

I can’t keep up with this comedy routine. Someone save me...

When I used Mapping to locate Jin now, I could see that he was inside a store that specialized in adventurer equipment. He was responsible for procuring all the food and supplies the Arrivers needed, so he was probably stocking up for tomorrow’s dungeon excursion.

Come to think of it, his earlier visit to the dungeon guild was probably to report our plans to dive to floor 18. He’d also probably stopped to browse the weapon shop for daggers that would be useful against new monsters we might find. And now he was here, securing provisions for our trip tomorrow.

“Why are we doing this stupid shadow mission again...?”

“It is pretty stupid, yeah...”

We should’ve been over there helping Jin, not following him around in secret. For better or worse, we were utterly dependent on him. Neither I, Force, Erin, Neme, nor Roslia had a hand in managing the party. We left absolutely everything to Jin. I doubt there were many parties out there who let that burden fall on the shoulders of just one member.

But, in truth, we didn’t have much recourse. Force, Erin, and Neme weren’t all that reliable, and Roslia couldn’t be trusted. As for me, I didn’t really have what it took to manage a party. So Jin had to work overtime to make up for all our incompetence. The Arrivers centered entirely on him—and today made me appreciate that more

than ever before.

“Let’s head home,” I said.

“What? We’re going back already?” Roslia asked.

“Yeah. We don’t need to follow him anymore.”

“I see...” she sighed, removing her hat and sunglasses before stripping off her coat. “It sure was stuffy in this getup. I’m glad I can finally take it off.”

“You shouldn’t have worn it in the first place...”

Roslia was... How should I put this? She had a remarkable talent for ruining the mood when other people were trying to be serious, you could say.

“Gosh, I thought I was going to overheat in that thing. Is there anywhere we can take a load off and rest for a bit?”

Upon closer inspection, Roslia’s shirt was damp with sweat and nearly see-through. I could see the faint outline of her blue bra. It was kind of sexy...



“How about over there?” she suddenly suggested.

She was pointing to one of those garishly flashy hotels. You know, the kind that clearly rents rooms by the hour.

“Yeah, I’m going home.”

“You’re so mean, Note! After I mustered all of my courage to invite you, too. And you just... Hic...”

“I *know* those are fake tears.”

“What? How?”

“That’s not really the issue at hand here.”

At that, Roslia stuck her tongue out childishly. I wish she’d cut the antics already... To passersby, it probably did look like I was picking on her.

“Who cares? The rest of the party’s not around, so no one would find out.”

“Again, not the issue here.”

“Well, once we’re in a relationship, I’m gonna tell the whole world. So I don’t really care if anyone sees us or not, y’know?”

“Wow, are you intent on destroying the Arrivers with your party-wrecking ways too?”

“I can almost see Erin’s distraught face now! It’ll be great! Let’s go right away!”

“Nope, not going.”

Roslia was persistently tugging on my arm, and I was desperately resisting her. A discarded coat and sunglasses lay on the ground beside us. A crowd was forming, watching us squabble.

What the hell *was* this?

The Main Characters' Untold Backstory

In all, it took us four days to clear floor 18. It was now two days later, and I was minding my own business as I relaxed in the living room.

“Hey, Note, you got a sec?” Force called out of the blue.

“Yeah. What’s up?” I replied.

“Nothing big. I was just thinking... why don’t we spar sometime?”

“I don’t mind, but I’m pretty weak. Why don’t you ask Jin? He doesn’t look too busy right now.”

“Nah, man. I wanna fight *you*. You feel me?”

“Hahh...”

After the incident with Erin the other day, I’d grown a little wary of people approaching me for favors in the living room. Force’s request, however, was perfectly agreeable to me. He was ready to go and everything—geared up with his sword hanging at his waist. I went upstairs to change into my dungeon gear too and grab my daggers.

After returning downstairs from my room, I found Force waiting for me in the hall.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Yeah. Where are we sparring today?”

“Where you usually spar with Jin should be fine, right?”

“Sure. We’ve sparred there before, after all.”

“Have we?”

“You don’t remember? You offered to help me train, then challenged me to a duel over Roslia...”

“Ah, right. Something like that did happen.”

“Don’t tell me that’s where this is going too.”

“Wh-What would make you think that?”

Way to start acting suspicious. Now I was worried.

And sure enough, as soon as we got there...

“Bwahaha! You’ve fallen for it now, Note! I called you out today to dispense your divine punishment at my hands!” Force declared, arrogantly leveling his silver sword at me.

“I figured it’d come to this...” I grumbled. “So, what is it this time? I don’t recall doing anything deserving of divine punishment.”

“Still playing innocent, huh?! I’ve got eyewitness testimony, you know!”

“But I haven’t *done* anything. Especially not anything I’d be ashamed of someone else ‘witnessing.’ Nevertheless, I’ll ask anyway—what offense am I charged with?”

“You were seen flirting with Roslia in front of a hotel!”

Ah, so that’s what this was about. Our shadowing mission had devolved and, yes, it’s true that we ended up outside of a hotel. We even stopped to talk for a bit. I... guess that could look like flirting to an onlooker?

“I take your silence as an admission of guilt, then?” Force pressed, practically surging bloodlust.

Scary...

“Y-You see, wh-what happened is...” I stammered in a fluster.

“I don’t need your excuses! Just the truth! So come clean! Did you or did you not do it with Roslia?!”

“Is that really any of your business?!”

“Well, did you lose your V-card? Moreover, did you take Roslia’s?!”

Jeez, just how crass could he be?! This part of him really made him seem like a lame virgin... Not that I had any room to talk.

“No, nothing happened! We didn’t do it!” I assured him.

“Ha, I knew it. There’s *no way* you’re outta the club so soon,” he sighed with profound relief.

There, he clapped one hand piteously on my shoulder and clenched his other hand tight in a fist pump... What the heck was that for? Was he *happy* I was still a virgin?

“I still have to kick your ass, though,” he said suddenly.

“Why?!” I yelped.

“Even if you didn’t do the do, you still flirted with Roslia, didn’t you?”

“I mean, maybe? The situation was complicated.”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

I could see no end to this line of questioning if I played coy, so I decided to spill the beans and explain to Force what Roslia and I were really doing that day.

“Huh, so that’s what you were up to...”

“Yeah.”

“But, like, doesn’t that mean you *weren’t* supposed to tell me Riece has a crush on Jin?”

Shit. I’d gone and done it again. Not only had I let it slip to Roslia, but now I’d inadvertently told Force too. Did... Did I actually have loose lips?

Well, there's no crying over spilled milk. We'd better move on...

"Let's just keep this a secret between us, okay, Force?"

"Sure, but damn if I'm ever telling you any of my secrets in the future."

"Roslia said the same thing. I think that might be for the best." It hurt to give Force another reason to look down on me, but oh well.

"So, do you know if Jin has a lover or not?"

"Nah, not Jin. Definitely not."

"What makes you so sure, though? I mean, don't you think it'd be easy for him to get a girl? He's pretty cool and all..."

"Unlike us, it's not that he can't get one. He doesn't *want* one."

I wished he'd stop casually lumping us together like that. I'd been pretty close to getting a girlfriend recently, actually. Sort of. I was pretty certain my prospects were better than Force's, at least.

"What do you mean?" I asked for further details.

"Hmm, I don't really think it's my place to say," Force replied.

"Ask Jin yourself. Fair warning, it has to do with his past as an assassin."

It felt like Jin's past had been cropping up everywhere recently. Riece, Force, Jin himself... everyone was talking about it.

"I've always wanted to ask, but when you say 'assassin,' you don't mean his battle style, do you?"

At that, Force folded his arms behind his head.

"That's right," he said casually. "Jin's a professional killer—although not like you might think. He was a member of a hit squad in the employ of some awful noble. That's the more accurate way to put it. But, yeah, that's who he was before he joined the party. In fact, I first met Jin because I was one of his targets."

"What are you talking about?"

I found myself leaning forward with anticipation and curiosity. Force smirked as he reeled me in.

"Well, it's not exactly a secret. This is as good a chance as any, so I guess I might as well tell you. About how I met Jin and what happened before we formed the Arrivers..."

*

"Here's a question for you first, Note: did you have a childhood dream?" I asked.

It wasn't directly related to the story I was about to tell, but I decided to start with a roundabout conversational opener because I thought he'd understand. What I was about to share with him was a big deal. No one else knew but Jin. It wasn't that I didn't trust Neme or Erin, who I'd actually known far longer than Note... It's just that this stuff was way less embarrassing to confess to another guy.

My question, however, was met with suspicion.

“What? Why are you asking that out of the blue?” he asked worriedly.

“Just answer it,” I urged him.

“Yeah, I had a dream. I wanted to become an adventurer with my childhood friend. I blew it, though.”

“I see. So your dream didn’t come true, huh?”

Come to think of it, I’d heard Note whine about his past before. Something about his childhood friend dumping him or whatever. I’d wanted to slap some sense into him at the time. He had no idea how lucky he was to even *have* a cute childhood friend to reminisce about.

“Well, my dream was to become the strongest swordsman.”

Memories of my past bubbled up one after another. This was the story... of how I got my start.

“This was back when I was a kid, an ordinary little boy named Force Granz whose parents dragged him kicking and screaming to a dojo. You hear it all the time. Stories of parents who force their kids to learn combat techniques or swordsmanship or whatever. Anyway, that dojo was where I met Master... though he wasn’t my master yet at the time. I just saw this guy using his sword, and I knew it. I *knew* he was the strongest swordsman. I wanted to be like him.”

I idly kicked away the pebbles on the ground by my feet and took a seat. Note followed suit.

“After that, I devoted myself to learning my way around a blade. While everyone else my age was distracted with girls, I put everything I had into swordsmanship without a spare thought for romance. Maybe if I’d taken more of an interest in love back then, I’d have a girlfriend by now...”

“Yeah, I doubt it.”

Hey, pal! I’m talking serious here. Keep your stupid rebuttals to yourself, thanks.

I’m not even a bad-looking guy, mind you. As soon as I learned how to talk up the ladies, I was sure I’d bag a girlfriend or two. Hell, maybe even five.

Anyway, we were getting off topic here, so I decided to get back to the point.

“My efforts started to pay off as I gradually got better and better with a sword. I could tell I was getting stronger. I first surpassed my peers, and then I started competing with the older kids. That was the life, man. It felt like every day *meant* something. If I couldn’t do something one day, I’d come back to it several weeks later and crush it. And by then, I’d be faced with a whole new set of challenges and hurdles. It was never-ending, but I believed I’d one day surpass even my master if I could just keep overcoming them.”

Talking about those days stirred something deep inside me. I kicked away another stone as if beating back my restlessness. It tumbled along feebly before hitting Note's feet. After that, silence hung over us for a moment.

"Does that mean something happened?" he finally asked.

"I turned fifteen and got my skills. That's all."

"That can't seriously be all it took..."

"It seriously was. When I pulled those skills, I surpassed my master instantly. I achieved my dream without lifting a finger. Honestly, it sucks. This world where skills dictate everything is so freaking boring. No matter how hard anyone trains, Sword Mastery will never beat Superior Sword Mastery. That's just how it is. And I spent so long thinking I was no match for him... It's almost laughable."

When I turned fifteen, I found out the hard way that my master wasn't really the strongest swordsman in the world. He'd just looked that way to my ignorant eyes as a child. He was, at best, average among the masses in a world where skills reigned supreme.

"People'll tell you your dreams'll come true as long as you never give up. And I think they're right. But even so, the cold truth is that you don't always get what you want. Take me, for example. I became the strongest swordsman just like I'd dreamed, but I didn't get what I wanted out of it."

Sometimes those are two different things. When I said I wanted to be like my master, what I *meant* was that I wanted to hone that level of skill through years of training and hard work like he had. That was what I truly wanted... and I only came to realize it when I turned fifteen and got my skills.

"Lots of people would love to have that problem, you know?"

"People with trash skills like you, maybe. But it doesn't change how I feel, y'know? Screw consideration. I'm gonna say what's on my mind and tell people what I think."

"Yeah, thanks, I totally didn't know that..."

"After that, I started traveling. I was trying to find another swordsman to pursue. But no matter who I fought, I couldn't find anyone stronger than me..."

"Careful. That sounds infuriatingly close to bragging."

"It's not bragging; it's the truth. I was bored out of my mind back then. Without anyone worthy to fight, I grew tired of the sword and started chasing women instead. But with my lack of experience, that didn't go well either..."

In those days, I regretted taking up the sword so many times. It pained me just to hold a blade... but there was still a small part of me that thought it was fun. If 90 percent of me hurt, I had a feeling the

other 10 percent of me might never be happy again if I truly let it go. So in the end, I never abandoned the sword.

“Mind you, crushing everyone who dared to challenge me earned me a lot of hate. I once trounced a knight serving some noble named Deanlurk, who then decided he wanted me dead. And the assassin he sent after me? It was Jin.”

“So that’s how you two met...”

“Yup. We fought, and... Well, let’s say I suddenly became aware that just because I was the strongest swordsman in the land didn’t make me the strongest man. Jin used a blade too, and when I saw how he used it, I was ecstatic. It was like my blood was boiling. Like my whole body was burning up.”

Thinking back on it, I was almost as moved as when I first saw my master... No, in truth, it was even more profound than that. My fists clenched unwittingly. Heat tickled the corners of my eyes.

“I wanted so badly to fight him more. I wanted to find other people like him who’d reached the top of their class. I wanted to compete with them. That’s all I could think. It made me realize the world’s a pretty big place. There are so many battle styles out there. Be it assassin, mage, priest, hunter, alchemist, or anything else... Surely, I thought, there had to be other people out there as strong as me and Jin.”

Recalling our fight back then was enough to give me the chills, even now. Jin was sharp. Fierce. If it weren’t for my Mind’s Eye skill, I would’ve been a dead man for sure. That danger, that imminent threat to my life... It made me move like I never had before. My mind accelerated too.



I'm not really sure how I came to the conclusion I did at the time. Maybe it was because I'd heard an adventurer mention dungeons before our encounter. Maybe it was because I sought an arena where I could fight with other battle styles on equal footing. Maybe it was just because I thought I could accomplish something amazing with the man in front of me...

"Before I knew it, I was calling out to Jin mid-fight, 'Hey, if you're this strong, do you wanna form a party with me and go dungeon diving?'"

I'll never forget the face Jin made. His narrow eyes shot wide open.

"After that, I threw everything I had at him. We were in the middle of a fight, but I forgot about swinging my sword and desperately tried to convince him. I'm surprised he didn't kill me. Thank God it was Jin, you know?"

"You mean he agreed to that?!"

"Well, he refused at first. Said, 'Sorry, I can't do that. Deanlurk raised me as his assassin, and he doesn't tolerate deserters. Someone would eventually come to kill us.'"

"Then how...?"

"I said right back, 'Then we should just kill him first. He's the kind of wretch who sends assassins after people, so he should be prepared for me to return the favor. It might be too much for me to do alone, but I reckon we could do it with the two of us.'"

"That's nuts..."

"Even so, we were strong enough to make it happen. Jin burst out laughing when he heard my proposal, though. Only time I've ever seen him bust a gut like that."

Yet afterward, he said yes and we immediately got to work. I kicked down the front door of the Deanlurk estate, raising hell about how he'd tried to kill me. His men surrounded me, and while they were distracted, Jin—who I'd said was dead—snuck in and went straight for Deanlurk. It seemed he had personal business with his master. He insisted on being the one to do the deed. Perhaps it was just to keep me from dirtying my hands.

"And so the newly freed Jin formed a party with me."

"This almost sounds like some fairytale. It's completely different from how I joined the party..."

"What you went through is more the norm. Not Neme who joined shortly after, the other members who've come and gone since, or Erin who's a relatively new addition... None of them went through that kind of drama. Jin and I are just special."

This party was made for me and Jin. Everyone else just climbed

aboard after the fact. That's how the Arrivers came to be. That was our backstory. No matter what anyone else said or contributed, that was how we got our start. Jin and I were the main characters who tied this tale together.

*

Having gotten everything off his chest, Force took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. I don't think he'd ever been so open with me. It'd been some time since I joined the party now... but I think I only just today started to understand Force a little.

Of course, there was still plenty I *didn't* understand. I didn't have a strong skill myself, so I would never truly comprehend the woes of the gifted. But even so, I'd learned that even people who seemed completely unfettered had worries of their own.

I guess everyone did. Be it big or small, we all have problems you'd never guess based on our appearances. Things we carry with us. Burdens we can't necessarily share with other people. Misery that can't be measured by the misfortune of others.

"Are you satisfied now?" I asked Force. "With your life with the Arrivers?"

I'd joined the party at Jin's invitation. The Arrivers had saved me. Maybe that's why I was desperate to know if Force had found his salvation here too.

"Who knows? I think I am. Life hasn't been so bad," Force said with an unbridled grin.

"If you're happy here, then don't let women like Roslia seduce you into quitting!"

"You...! You're really gonna bring that up now?!" Force roared with laughter in response to my playful jab. "That's totally different, man. You know how they say love is blind?"

"It's infuriating to admit, but yeah... I know what you mean."

I too had once almost betrayed the party over Roslia. I could only hound Force so much without being a hypocrite.

"I got a bone to pick though, Note. I wasn't seduced into anything. Roslia and I were in *love* back then."

"Do you seriously believe that?"

"Of course! You bamboozled her into falling for you, but she'll come around and come back to her senses eventually... I think..."

It seemed Force was still bewitched by Roslia... I really had no idea if her apparent fascination with me now was all an act or what. But I was 100 percent sure she was never crawling back to Force.

"Bleh. I know I brought it up, but just talking about this is giving me a headache," I groaned.

"Yeah, seriously. Why'd you even bring it up?" Force jabbed.

“Let me ask you something else instead.”

“What?”

“When we first met and everyone introduced themselves, why did you say your motivation for conquering the dungeon was to be popular with women? Isn’t your goal really more like Erin’s? To prove you’re the strongest?”

“Nah, I got nothing to prove. Even if I don’t make a show of it, I know I’m the strongest, y’know?”

“Well, I can’t deny that...”

“I had a new dream after meeting Jin: fighting alongside the strongest people I could find and competing with them. That dream came true when I formed this party, so it’s not like I can say *that’s* my reason for dungeon diving.”

“I guess not, huh?”

“So my only unfulfilled goal now is getting a girlfriend. That’s all.”

“I kinda get you, and yet I kinda don’t...”

“It’ll be easy enough once we conquer the dungeon and have more fame than we know what to do with. Really, pulling this party together was like killing multiple birds with one stone for me... Damn, I’m so good it’s almost scary,” Force mumbled with a self-satisfied nod.

His extraordinary assessment of his own worth wasn’t all that far off the mark. We were only together now because he’d formed the Arrivers. So without his harebrained idea in the first place... we’d all be living much blander lives right now.

“Surprisingly, I’m starting to see why you’re the leader of the Arrivers.”

“Hey! You’re only just now starting to see that?! And what do you mean, ‘surprisingly’?!”

Force shouted loud enough that his voice carried on the wind, echoing in the forest around us.

His Role Within the Arrivers

It was like a scene out of a picture book. That was the perfect way to describe the landscape of floor 19.

Countless fish circled the transparent indigo expanse. Between the gaps of the rugged boulders at our feet grew filmy plants that were foreign to the outside world. A star-shaped creature of vibrant colors was crawling across the boulder to my right, and there was a shadow deep at the bottom of the valley below writhing like a snake.

It was almost like we were in some kind of ocean or vast lake, but we could still breathe the air here. Yet nevertheless, fish were swimming in the sky overhead. It was like we'd been transported to a miniature world where the creatures of the sea had adapted to life on land.

Enemy Search, however, alerted me to the dangers lurking amidst the beauty of it all—monsters. That's right; we were in the dungeon. This was no time to be admiring the scenery.

"Hahh... Hahh..." Erin was panting beside me. Sweat poured down her face, drenching her hair. "There're so many... How long are they going to keep spawning?"

Even as she complained, she charged her staff with magic energy and fired a blast of lightning. The fish closing in on us were all fried to a crisp, dropping lifelessly to the ground... yet we were in the middle of an onslaught, and there were still more coming. How many did this make now? The number of large fish monsters Erin had wiped out so far was well into the double-digits.

The most notable trait of the monsters on this floor was their ability to swim through the air. That made it difficult to approach them, which put our close-combat fighters—Force and Jin—at a serious disadvantage. That was why we were relying so heavily on Erin's ranged spells right now.

I watched her as she continued to strike down the enemies approaching from the front. I then swiftly turned to Roslia...

"There are more coming from behind. I'm counting on you."

Roslia had some long-ranged attacks too. Her spells weren't as powerful as Erin's, but she could easily take out smaller monsters on her own.

"Can you hold out here by yourself, Erin?" Roslia teased with a wicked grin.

“Shut up! It’s not a problem!” Erin snapped back.

“You look like you’re struggling to me...”

“I told you it’s not a problem! I’m fine! Perfectly fine! I just look tired because I didn’t get much sleep last night!”

“Isn’t that excuse a little too forced...?”

I had to agree with Roslia’s exasperation there. No matter how you looked at it, Erin was spent from using too much magic. This begged a question in my mind, so I turned to Neme, who was presently draped over my shoulder.

“Erin has Superior Mana Pool, right? So why is she so exhausted?”

Erin was blessed with unlimited magic energy thanks to her skill. With it, at least hypothetically, she should be able to cast spells endlessly... But she sure didn’t look like that was the case right now.

“Simply casting spells is exhausting, stupid Note! That’s just how it is! Neme will teach you in a way that even your silly brain can understand!”

Neme sounded pretty full of herself, but proceeded to unload an explanation that... made about as little sense as I expected. Oh well. I took a moment to review everything she said and try to piece it all together.

Apparently, there were three steps for a mage to cast a spell. First and foremost, they had to gather the requisite mana for the spell by drawing it out from within themselves. Second, they had to tap that energy somehow—usually by channeling it into a catalyst like a staff or crystal ball. And lastly, they had to convert that energy into a spell. Only when all three steps were complete could a mage actually unleash their magic.

This process varied from battle style to battle style. Whereas mages converted their own mana into magic, for example, priests and paladins used their magic energy to beseech divine power from on high. According to Neme, it was totally different. That was how they could heal people, enhance physical abilities, and even smite their foes. Since I wasn’t a magic user myself, though, the distinctions were all pretty vague.

“But what you’re telling me, Miss Neme, is that no matter how much mana Erin has, she still has to refine that mana and convert it into magic... and that’s why she gets tired?”

“Exactly! That’s what Neme was trying to say!”

So even if she has limitless magic, she can’t use it limitlessly...

As I stood there nodding to myself, I suddenly noticed a disturbing presence. It was approaching from the front.

“What... What is that?” I muttered, alarmed and confused.

“What is what?” Neme asked in response.

“Can you see that?” I asked, pointing ahead of us.

“That black hazy thing?”

“Yeah. I think that might be the mid-boss.”

I had my suspicions, and what I could detect via Enemy Search only fueled them.

“The mid-boss?!” Erin reacted poorly to hearing that word. “Nuh-uh! No way! I already have my hands full enough as it is!”

“Ooh? What was that? I thought you said earlier that you were perfectly f—”

“Note! Roslia’s being mean again!”

“Don’t go crying to Note! You’re making me look like the bad guy!”

With that, they started glaring daggers at each other. I wished they wouldn’t drag me into the middle of it...

Seriously. Trouble was closing in by the second. This wasn’t the time to be joking around. My job was to diligently relay the information I detected via Enemy Search to the party. If I couldn’t even do that, I was just dead weight.

Thus I ignored the girls and announced, “There’s a school of smaller fish heading this way. Maybe ten thousand of them. They’re weak individually, but they have the strength of a boss altogether.”

“Now *you’re* being mean to me too?!” Erin whimpered like an abandoned kitten.

“Have you no heart, Note?” Roslia asked coldly.

Don’t hold it against me, ladies! This is literally my job!

“You know, Erin, if this is too much for you... we can always retreat,” Roslia continued with a sly grin.

“I don’t need your false sympathy!” Erin roared. “I can do this, damn it! Just watch me!”

“Goodness, and here I am trying to be nice. Don’t you think that’s a little rude?”

Jeez, do they get along or not...?

“Stop teasing each other and get ready for battle!” I barked.

“We are *not* teasing each other!”

“What part of this looks like teasing to you?”

Still griping, the girls reluctantly took their positions as the party fell into combat formation.

“Here we go!” Erin yelled, raising her staff that was now overflowing with magic energy. “Sweeping Bolt!”



When she incanted those words, a grating screech rang through the air. The high-pitched explosion pierced my eardrums and rattled my brain. The entire area was flooded with light. It burned my eyes and painted my vision white, temporarily blinding me. I could only rely on Enemy Search for now...

And it told me the fish were still approaching. The school had been thinned, but it had survived. Losing one or two thousand of its ranks wouldn't stop its advance. It was still headed straight for us—and fast.

“The mid-boss is still alive and kicking! It's charging this way!” I informed the party...

Or at least, I tried. I realized the moment I opened my mouth that I could barely hear myself. My ears were still pounding from the roar of Erin's spell. Shit. There was no way my voice would reach anyone like this.

“Control the power of your magic, Erin...” I grumbled, not that she could hear me.

I found Roslia with Enemy Search and urgently tapped her on the back. She understood the gesture—thank goodness—and swiftly activated Impenetrable Fortress, her protective barrier spell.

The school of fish hammered against it as they swam by, slowly but surely wearing it down. Roslia's Impenetrable Fortress was one of the best defensive spells out there, but not even it would hold up forever against the mid-boss of floor 19.

What do we do? Think, Note, think...

Neither my vision nor my hearing had completely returned to me yet. I could only vaguely perceive my surroundings thanks to Enemy Search. Jin was probably in a similar position.

He and I will probably have to be the ones to—

While I was frantically trying to formulate a plan, Force made his move. He drew one of his swords, Gleaming Beast, and the next moment... it was like the world split in two.

I could tell even through my blurry vision that he'd cut through the wall of light, the school of fish, and everything else. There was a defined gap in the mid-boss's presence now. He must have used some kind of art, but he'd done so with great precision. It was like he had a perfect grasp of the situation.

He must've regained his sight... No, wait.

I recalled Force's skill Mind's Eye, which allowed him to perceive all attacks. That must have mitigated the sensory damage Erin's spell had caused, much like Enemy Search did for me.

But I didn't have to rely on the art for much longer. As I scrutinized Force's movements, my sight returned to me. I could

suddenly see myself and everything around me again. The rapid influx of visual information was accompanied by a peculiar sensation. My body felt light, like I was restless.

It was probably the effect of Neme's healing spell. She must have activated it as soon as she recovered from the initial disorientation of being blinded. With my newly recovered eyes and ears, I could see and hear as clearly as ever. I'd honestly never considered that Neme might be the one to save us here; it was times like this that healing magic really stole the show.

"Pass 'em!" Force yelled as he started running.

We could all readily hear him now. Jin and the girls quickly chased after him, darting through the path he'd cut open for us. I grabbed Neme and followed suit.

Fleeing in the opposite direction of their charge, we quickly made it out of the school of fish. The fish at the lead of the pack, however, was already turning around. They had no intention of letting us get away. They were coming right back for us.

We were in for a second wave.

I looked over at Erin, who was glaring at the lead fish. Her staff was already loaded with magic. All she had left to do was convert it into a spell. I then glanced at Neme, who was also readying another spell of her own.

Seconds later, an incredible burst of lightning and thunder erupted around us—Erin's Sweeping Bolt. It ate away at the fish as it radiated outward. The cycle then continued to repeat itself. Roslia raised her Impenetrable Fortress, and Neme activated her recovery spell.

Unfortunately, however, Roslia's barrier this time around wasn't as stalwart. She hadn't been able to pour as much magical energy into it. Arrow-headed fish needled their way through the cracks in it, hurdling toward us like projectiles. Jin used his Shadow Runner to take out the ones Erin missed...

But the situation was deteriorating. At this rate, we'd be overwhelmed by their numbers. Erin's second shot had only taken out five hundred or so of the fish. If we kept this up, Roslia would run out of magic before we—

Wait, five hundred? Did she really only take out five hundred fish with that spell?

Doubts suddenly filled my head. Erin's second shot of Sweeping Bolt was just as powerful as the first, so why the discrepancy? We were at closer range now, so if anything, it should have taken out more. What was going on?

I had a bad feeling about this.

Force cut open a path through the swarming school of fish again,

and we followed him through it. We were getting desperate now. Jin and Force took care of the stray fish that darted toward us, while Neme supported the party with her buffs. Roslia had her hands full preparing her next casting of Impenetrable Fortress.

As for Erin, she charged up another Sweeping Bolt... and when she unleashed it, my worst fear came to fruition. Her third shot took out even fewer than the second.

“It’s not working...”

“You think so too?”

It seemed Jin had noticed the same thing. He likely had a good handle on their numbers thanks to Enemy Search too.

“Erin, use a different spell each time you attack. The fish that have survived are probably resistant to lightning,” he called out.

Ah, so it wasn’t that the effectiveness of her spell was decreasing—just that the surviving mobs were resistant to it. That made perfect sense. The school was formed of thousands of fish, each type with its own resistances and threat level. It wasn’t like they were all the same.

That meant we’d likely need several different types of spells to take out the entire school. In that regard, we were lucky to have Erin, who could use multiple types of elemental magic. If the wrong party with the wrong mage made it down here... this would be game over for them. Floor 19 was no joke.

Our MVP right now, however, didn’t seem very pleased. Her face was twitching.

“Seriously? You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

She’d end up firing spell after spell for another two hours after that.

Eventually, our efforts against the mid-boss of floor 19 paid off and we were able to claim victory. The price we paid, however, was a hefty one. Erin was, well...

“I hate fish. They suck. I wish they’d just vanish off the face of the planet. I never want to see another fish again as long as I live.”

I-Is she okay?

In spite of our triumph, the light was gone from her eyes. Each subsequent battle had drained more from her until she ended up like this—some kind of robotic husk of herself. Still, that didn’t change or negate what she’d accomplished. The helpless Erin I’d met on floor 20 seemed like nothing more than a forgotten dream. She might be muttering strangely to herself now, but she’d certainly proved her mettle as a reliable top-tier mage.

“All right, let’s get through the boss room and go home,” I suggested.

“We’re fighting *again*?” she whined.

“This’ll be our last battle. You wanna get home, don’t you?”

“Fine. But I want a nice, long break after this.”

Yeah, that was fair. Erin had more than pulled her weight on this floor. She deserved a good respite.

Her silver pigtails danced as she walked forward. Watching her reminded me just how amazing she was... No, just how amazing the Arrivers were. During the mid-boss battle, she, Roslia, Force, Jin, and Neme had all contributed. They understood their roles within the party and fulfilled them flawlessly.

As for me, all I’d done was carry Neme and run. That was it. Did I really have a place with this party? I couldn’t help wondering. I had Mapping and all, but that was only useful while we were exploring. In actual combat, I was like thin air. I was just sort of... there. I was technically accomplishing what the Arrivers had asked of me, but I wasn’t satisfied with the status quo.

My desire to be useful in combat grew stronger by the day, yet I couldn’t even use Critical properly as things stood. And since I didn’t have any combat skills, I wouldn’t hold a candle to the other members even if I *did* learn attack arts. In the time it’d take me to defeat one monster, they could polish off a dozen or more.

I had to find a fighting style that would allow me to contribute something to the party. Something that would make me an asset. That was my assignment from Riece... and it was starting to seem like an impossible task.

“Let’s get going, then.”

I looked around at the party and put my hand against the stone door to the boss room. My uselessness in battle wasn’t new to me or them, so there was no point in dwelling on it here. That could wait until we got home. For now, it was time to concentrate on the boss battle.

Enemy Search revealed to me that there were two monsters inside the chamber. I couldn’t tell what kind, but they were both strong—each easily the equivalent of any previous boss. The bosses we’d been facing recently had been giving us enough trouble as it was, and now we were up against two. This would be a dangerous fight indeed.

I metered my breathing and focused my mind, flipping a switch within myself. Once I had my heartbeat under control, I opened the door. A gust of wind greeted us. It was a warm and humid sensation, ruffling my hair as it blew past.

Two mermaids occupied the center of the chamber. One was red and the other blue. I met the gaze of the latter—its round, amber eyes staring back at me. The faces, fins, and physiques of the two mermaids seemed to indicate they were different species. They both stood about four meters tall, but the red one was brawny with a rounded spine. Its

arms were thicker than my torso, and it wielded a sturdy-looking sword and shield. In contrast, the blue one was slender and stood fully on guard with a spear in hand.

There was a momentary flash of overwhelming hostility from the front—the blue mermaid. It was more than ready to kill. I could barely follow the movement of its tail with my eyes.

Stream!

My instincts reacted faster than my conscious mind. I leaned into the art, twisting my upper body like I was gliding and using my momentum to throw my legs up. Spiraling through the air, I spun right over the trajectory of the spear. My lower body narrowly avoided the tip.

“Tch...!”

I continued to lean into the rotation, knowing I couldn’t stop. The moment I hesitated, I’d be killed.

Don’t stress the details... Think only of survival...

Predicting I’d land on my right leg, I tensed my ankle and calf. I was poised. Ready. I just had to hold it like that, and...

Now!

I activated Withdraw the second I hit the ground. The mermaid’s spear zeroed in on me. I felt an impact on my left shoulder. There was a gash, but it was superficial. It had to be—otherwise I would’ve been dead. Such jumbled thoughts ran through my head as I sailed backward through the air. I’d activated Withdraw from such an unsteady stance that I couldn’t control my direction or momentum well... and ended up slamming into the wall behind me.

“Note!” I heard Erin yell.

Just then, Jin unleashed his Bloodlust on the blue mermaid. It immediately switched targets and turned to face him. Once I saw that, I activated Stealth. With a little room to breathe, I took a moment to pull myself together and review the situation.

The blue mermaid attacked before we were in formation... before Roslia could draw their attention. That was why it went for the closest target—me.

Jin’s Bloodlust had redirected its attention and given me a chance to use Stealth, which allowed me to get to safety. If he hadn’t done that, I would’ve had no recourse but to stay in combat and keep dodging. If I’d used Stealth without Jin taking point, the mermaid would have gone for Erin or Neme instead.

In other words, he’d saved us. If he’d acted just two seconds later, I, for one, would have been a goner. I was pretty certain I couldn’t have evaded the blue mermaid’s attack from where I was slumped on the floor.

“I’m sorry, Note! That was my fault!” Roslia called out as she

activated her aggro-attracting Beacon.

The red mermaid instantly swooped for her with a slash of its sword. The clanging of metal on metal rang in my ears—Roslia had caught the mermaid's blade with her shield. She staggered half a step back. She was completely outmatched in terms of strength. Force immediately moved to cover her, while Neme channeled magic energy into her staff. She was preparing a Regeneration Plus spell so that he could use Purgatory.

Force carried two swords when we were in the dungeon, each with its own purpose. He primarily relied on Gleaming Beast, which was an incredibly fine blade. But his preferred weapon, Purgatory, was much stronger. It was a cursed blade that consumed its wielder in ominous flames. It wasn't entirely safe for him to use it without Neme's buffs. She knew the drill.

The moment she raised her staff to cast her spell, however, the blue mermaid whipped around to face her. Jin noticed and swiftly grabbed Neme, leaping away faster than the incoming spear. It thrust through the air where she'd just been standing moments ago.

"Erin, hold off on any spells!" Jin yelled.

Erin blinked in puzzlement, but willingly dismissed the magic energy she'd been gathering in her staff.

"These mermaids change targets too easily!" he explained as he delivered Neme to safety and returned to the fray. "Don't cast anything carelessly!"

His judgment was always rapid and precise. I had only the deepest respect for the way he could give sound orders in the heat of a fight. It was something only he could do, thanks to his wealth of experience and know-how.

"Force, can you lend me a hand? I want to take this blue one down quickly," he asked.

"No can do!" responded Roslia. "We've got our hands full over here!"

The red mermaid she and Force were fighting was tough enough that it was keeping both of them occupied. If Force stepped away, Roslia would easily be in over her head. The red mermaid—a brute force melee opponent—was a bad matchup for her. Roslia's MO was to capitalize on her spells to safely finish off her foes with her holy sword... but the red mermaid kept breaking through her barriers.

At this rate, she wouldn't be able to use her holy sword to its full potential. Force also had his hands full covering for her. They could probably get the upper hand if Force could use Purgatory, but that would be a risky maneuver without Neme's healing on tap.

"Note, I need a favor!" Jin suddenly called my way. "Switch places with Force!"

For a moment, I was certain I misheard him.

“Huh?” I asked reflexively.

But, oh, how wrong I was...

“Switch places with Force and cover for Roslia!” he repeated as he evaded the blue mermaid’s spear.

“H-Hold on...”

I couldn’t do that. First and foremost, I had no means of attacking. That meant I was absolutely powerless against the mermaid.

“There’s no way I can defeat that thing, Jin...”

“You don’t have to defeat it. Just keep its attention on you.”

“What?”

“You can use Bloodlust, right?”

“Yeah...”

That was the art I’d picked up during the disaster on floor 20. It allowed me to draw a monster’s attention to myself.

“Use it with your evasive arts to pull attacks away from and off of Roslia! That should make things much easier for her!”

“But—”

“It’s okay! I know you can do it, Note! I saw you dodge that first attack!”

It was true I’d managed to avoid the blue mermaid’s first attack on an absolute fluke.

But just maybe...

I glanced over to where Roslia and Force were fighting.

Maybe I can do this.

Unlike with the blue mermaid, I could easily follow the red one’s attacks. It was certainly a powerful foe; it just wasn’t as fast as the blue one. Really, this should be a cakewalk compared to the mid-boss I faced on floor 20. Memories of that fight started flashing through my head.

The gears of my brain were turning furiously. My blood was heating up. I... I wanted to fight. That desire welled up within me, wholly unrelated to my desperation to help out the party or comply with Jin’s orders. I wanted another taste of that fleeting sensation I’d experienced when confronting the armored warrior. I wanted to put everything on the line against an overwhelmingly strong opponent.

I was excited. And surprised at myself. I could hardly believe I was so amped for a life-or-death situation. Never in my wildest dreams would I have even thought I, Note Athlon, had it in me.

Common folk had a saying about the likes of us: “Dungeon adventurers live and die fast.” It was fair, considering the monsters of the dungeon were far more dangerous than anything that walked the surface. And here I was, willingly hurling myself into the fast lane. It wasn’t that I had a death wish. I wanted to do everything in my power

to keep myself alive, yet... my desire to fight was simply stronger.

Like this, I could finally stand as an equal with the Arrivers.

If I took a single hit from one of the mermaids, I'd be torn to shreds. But so what? I just had to make sure I didn't get hit. There was no point in visualizing my potential failures. I would stay in the moment and cross that bridge if we ever got there.

I took a deep breath, stepped forward, and called out to Force...

"Switch with me!"

"You got it! She's all yours!"

Force stepped back, allowing me to take his position. When we passed, I couldn't help noticing the corner of his mouth was curled into a smirk for some reason.

I then focused my attention on the red mermaid and activated Bloodlust... but Roslia's Beacon seemed to be stronger. The mermaid was entirely focused on her.

"If your Bloodlust isn't powerful enough, use Stealth first. The contrast should be enough to get any monster's attention," called Jin from afar.

He was currently soloing the blue mermaid, yet he had the leisure to be giving me advice? Just how amazing was he? I immediately did what he suggested, activating Stealth and Bloodlust in turn. The red mermaid suddenly looked my way.

Here it comes...

I evaded its attack with plenty of clearance using Stream. That was a relief. It meant I could handle this without resorting to Pseudo Shadow Runner. In truth, both Force and I were at a disadvantage without Neme's healing magic at the ready. Neither of us could utilize our full potential this way.

"Thanks, Note," Roslia said as she dug the tip of her holy sword into the mermaid's shoulder.

Since Force didn't have any aggro-grab arts, monsters usually went after Roslia when they were paired up together. With me here, however, Roslia could focus on offense instead of defense. She'd landed that attack just now because I'd taken point.

"This is the first time we've fought together like this," she mumbled, seemingly pleased as her sword danced through the air.

"Now that you mention it, yeah," I said with a grin. "You're usually the one protecting me, huh?"

This was my first time fighting alongside everyone since I'd joined the party. I was finally doing what I'd wanted to all along. When I realized that, I couldn't help smiling.

I let that sense of satisfaction fuel me, kicking myself into high gear. I dropped low, my torso nearly hitting the ground as I deftly ducked under a sweep of the mermaid's sword. That was another

evasive art I'd learned: Sinking Walk.

"Don't overdo it, Note! I can take a few attacks, too! I mean, I'm thrilled you'd jump in for me—but also terrified!"

Roslia seemed to think I was being reckless. I personally felt like I could do more, but I valued her opinion. Maybe I *was* getting a little too fired up...

"All right! I'll let you handle things for a bit!"

At Roslia's behest, I backed up and cloaked my presence with Stealth. The red mermaid immediately turned on her, drawn to Beacon. I used the opportunity to catch my breath, then waited for my next chance to use Bloodlust. We didn't need to defeat the red mermaid. We just needed to buy time until the blue mermaid was defeated. After all, Jin and Force were our real strike force.

I glanced over to see how they were doing. Force had just landed a direct hit on the blue mermaid's lower half. Good. They'd wrap things up soon and be over here in a matter of minutes. There was no need for us to rush. Just stay calm and buy time—that was all Roslia and I had to do to win.

I took another deep breath, then activated Bloodlust once more.



Jin and Force summarily defeated the blue mermaid afterward. With that, my job was complete. I tagged out with Jin and Force, who teamed up with Roslia against the remaining red mermaid. Outnumbered three to one, it didn't stand much of a chance. The match was settled within minutes. Thus we successfully conquered floor 19.

It was crystal clear, however, that things would only get tougher yet as we proceeded. The difficulty of each floor had steadily been ramping up as we went. Floor 19 had given us plenty of trouble along the way, including the mid-boss resistant to multiple types of magic and the floor boss who aggressively targeted spellcasters. Only a party with a balanced team setup would've been able to make it through.

And now... next up was floor 20, the wicked labyrinth Erin and I were stranded in for two months. Yet strangely enough, I wasn't afraid. Perhaps it was because I'd regained my confidence with my newfound combat role in the Arrivers—the decoy.

Sure, I couldn't use any attack arts. But I could hold aggro and kite like hell. So what if it took me ten times longer than any one to defeat a monster? That wasn't my job. My role here was supporting everyone else so that they could do their best. In the end, the solution to all of my woes was surprisingly simple.

The six of us were one party. We all had our strengths and weaknesses, and we fought together as complements. Finally, it seemed... at long last, I was starting to understand the true fun of being an adventurer.

All Kinds of Disaster

“Come on! Let’s go!”

“Where, though...?”

One morning after clearing floor 19, I was in my room contemplating what to do with myself when there came a knocking at my door. It was Erin, outfitted with her robe and staff despite us having the day off. She immediately proceeded to rush me out of my own room. It was all so sudden, I could barely follow what was happening.

Seeing my confusion, she said emphatically, “We’re going to Valkyrie’s base, of course!”

“What? To raid them?”

“Obviously not. I’m going to learn magic. Riece is taking forever to negotiate with the old witch, so I figure I might as well try asking myself.”

Riece was indeed having a tough time persuading Cathy. At this rate, Erin could be on hold forever before we got a real answer. But at the same time, it felt pretty careless for her to go barging into their base herself. I mean, she called Cathy an old witch just now, didn’t she? If she said something like that to her face, we could have a full-on war on our hands.

“Uh, is this really a good idea?” I couldn’t help asking. “If you say anything rude, it’s only going to add fuel to her fire.”

“Not even *I’m* that reckless.”

Really?

I shot her a dubious look, and she pointed to her mouth in response.

“Look, haven’t I been nicer when I talk to you recently?”

“I guess so...”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed. I can do anything when I set my mind to it, so don’t you worry.”

“Yeah, okay. If you say so. Have fun, then,” I said, turning away with a wave.

Erin then grabbed me with great force and demanded, “You’re going to make me go alone?!”

“Counterquestion: Why do I have to go with you?”

So much for that plan, I guess. I was hoping she’d just let me walk off, but that clearly wasn’t gonna fly.

“We promised our lives to each other on floor 20, but you won’t go to your death with me?”

“So you want to take me down with you?! I have no interest in waltzing into a deathtrap on purpose! Besides, this whole thing is your fault for pissing her off in the past!”

“That’s true, but...!”

Stop looking at me with those pleading, quivering eyes. You’re making it hard for me to say no when that’s clearly the right answer...

“All right,” I sighed. “But just this once.”

“Thank you!” she exclaimed, clasping my hand and leaping for joy.

It seemed like I’d developed something of a soft spot for Erin. I gladly would’ve turned her down immediately had she barked orders at me like she used to, but when she took the humble approach... I just couldn’t help it. Maybe I was a bit of a sucker too.

“Let me get ready, then. You can wait outside for me.”

“Okay. Just don’t sneak out through the window while I’m not looking.”

Hey, not even I would go that far.

“So this is Valkyrie’s base, huh?” Erin remarked.

“I can’t believe we’re really here...” I groaned, looking up at the building.

It was a stylish wooden structure that resembled a mountain cabin. The ornamental plants and flowers that decorated the window frames showcased the TLC the Valkyries put into their home base, especially compared to Arrivers’ HQ. It was consistent with their natural vibe, and the aesthetic was a nice touch.

Erin, however, didn’t look too impressed.

“What’s with that reaction, Note?” she asked, clearly displeased.

I couldn’t help it! I’d heard so many terrible rumors about Cathy. She was so notorious that I didn’t want her anywhere near Erin—an equally loose cannon.

“It isn’t too late to turn back now, you know?” I said. “We could just give up and go home.”

“What are you on about? That would be a total waste. We’ve already gone to the trouble of coming here. The least she owes me is a meeting.”

“So, just to be clear, do you really know how to behave yourself? The way you’re talking just *sounds* like you’re itching to pick a fight...”

“It’s fine! I’ve got this!” she insisted with a thumbs-up.

Honestly, I had no idea what was “fine” about this, but I could tell she had absolutely no intention of backing down now.

“Okay, I’m counting on you, Erin. Now hurry up and ring the

doorbell so you can get this over with.”

“Huh?! Aren’t *you* going to do the talking for me?”

“That’s the least you could do for yourself, Erin...” I said with a frown.

I was here to support her, not hold her hand. Thankfully, she seemed to get the message.

“F-Fine, I’ll do the talking. Just stay by my side, okay?”

“Okay. That much I can do.”

There, she grabbed me by the arm and started pulling me toward the wooden front door.

“Let me just be super clear here, Erin,” I admonished her. “You can’t say *anything* that’ll make her mad once we’re inside. Not one word about men, age, or how superior you are as a mage.”

“Do you really think I’m that stupid, Note?” Erin asked as she rang the bell.

A clear chime resounded, followed by silence. Neither Erin or I said a word—we were too nervous. I could tell via Enemy Search that someone was approaching the door. It wasn’t Riece, though. Probably another Valkyrie member. They leaned up against the inside of the door. I thought they were just checking the peephole to see who it was... but then there was a sudden explosion of hostility.

“Watch out, Erin!”

I grabbed her and made a mad dive to get us out from in front of the door. It wasn’t a second too soon. A thunderous roar immediately slammed into my back with a shockwave. I quickly looked back to see a small crater where we’d just been standing.

“Huh? What? What just happened?” Erin asked, looking around in confusion.

A single shadow stood amidst the smoke cloaking the area now.

“What are you here for, lass? To pick another fight?!” it yelled.

The smoke cleared just enough for me to see a woman with long hair and veins furiously protruding from her temples. She was dressed in a loose-fitting T-shirt and a pair of cropped navy pants—clearly her loungewear—and she was holding a long staff in her hand.

This had to be the infamous Cathy. I’d never met her before, but I recognized her instantly thanks to the hostility she was channeling directly at Erin. I mean, who else would fire at her on sight? She’d even blown up her own front door to do it...

Moreover, this was the first time I’d ever heard anyone call someone “lass” in real life. I honestly thought people only talked like that in stories.

“N-No! I’m here to ask for a favor!” Erin proclaimed, desperately waving her hands from underneath me.

Instead of lowering her weapon, however, Cathy angrily began

charging her staff with more magical energy.

“First you come knocking on my door with a man on your arm, and now you’re hiding behind him for protection?! Who’s he supposed to be, your lover?! You came to brag about getting yourself a man, didn’t you?!”

Ah, okay. So she was upset about how this looked... I mean, I was right on top of Erin. And, come to think of it, Erin was anxiously clinging to my arm when she rang the doorbell too. Cathy probably took it the wrong way.

What were you thinking, Erin?! This is partially my fault for not realizing it sooner, but you were supposed to be careful!

“My lover...? What? N-No, Note and I haven’t gotten that far yet...”

What are you being all coy for?! Now’s the time to deny it for your life! Cathy’s already a raging inferno, Erin! Dousing her with oil is not going to put her out!

“I’ll kill you both!” Cathy roared.

“No, don’t! At least spare Note!” Erin begged.

“There you go flirting again! That’s it—the man dies first!”

Erin really had no intention of bringing this situation under control, did she? She had to be goading Cathy on purpose. If not... that might actually be worse.

“Die!” she railed.

I activated Withdraw just as light flashed forth from the gem on the end of her staff. I grabbed Erin and made a mad dash to escape the spell. I then activated Stealth so we could get away for real.

Sorry, Erin, but I’m pretty sure that was the end of negotiations. Just give up for now.

“Where’d you go, lass?! Come out and show your face!”

We made a beeline back to Arrivers’ HQ from there, the roars of an enraged demon echoing through town behind us.

*

The day after that whole debacle, I gave Riece an earful for just heartlessly watching from the window when Cathy flipped out on us. In turn, she tried to blame me for the front entrance of Valkyrie’s base being blown to smithereens—emphasizing how much work it took to calm Cathy down after the fact. At the end of our discussion, however, we both agreed that it was entirely Cathy’s fault. The argument only took the entirety of our morning training session.

For the record, my Critical training was progressing slowly yet steadily. I could effectively use the art now, but not with satisfactory precision. I could output enough damage to hurt monsters on the surface—just not enough to finish them off. It wasn’t practicable at all

in this state.

Compared to the monsters that spawned on the surface, the monsters of the dungeon were far more formidable. It would be accurate to say your average attack against a surface monster wouldn't even scratch a dungeon mob.

Maybe Riece was right... Maybe I really didn't have the sense for combat. I just couldn't get the feel for it like I had with evasive and support arts. Or maybe believing that was simply holding me back.

Riece said she had business to attend to that afternoon, so we wrapped up after our morning session. I was a little disappointed to break early, but I couldn't object, so I reluctantly returned to HQ for lunch. While I was eating, I could detect Erin just waiting for her chance to approach me. So as soon as I cleared my plate... I turned to Neme, who was humming as she headed up to her room.

"Would you like to go shopping with me, Miss Neme?"

"Note's inviting me out?! How rare! Have you finally fallen for me?!"

"Why would you jump to that conclusion...? I'm just asking if you want to run errands together. So, what do you say? Want to go shopping?"

"Yeah, sure! Neme will go get ready!"

"Just make it quick, or else I'll get caught."

"What do you mean?" Neme asked curiously, her head cocked to the side as she entered the room.

Just then, I heard the footsteps of a silver-haired misfit rounding the corner...

"Oh, there you are, Note! I have another favor to ask. Would you come with me again to ask the old witch—"

"No way."

I made sure to shoot her down immediately. She was asking for the impossible, after all. Her opponent was simply out of reach. Some people couldn't be reasoned with. And while I didn't know for sure Cathy was one of them, I had no interest in risking my life again to try to find out.

Sorry, Erin, but if you still want to talk to Cathy, you'll have to go yourself. She's just more likely to attack if I'm there, anyway.

"Please! I'm begging you, Note! I don't have anyone else to ask!"

"Nope, not doing it again. I have plans with Neme, so I can't go regardless."

"But..."

I'd made said plans just a minute ago, but the point stood nevertheless. Unaware of my crafty scheme, Erin dejectedly relented and left alone. Neme returned shortly after, having changed her clothes.

“All ready to go?” I asked.

“Yup! Neme can’t wait to go shopping with Note!”

I didn’t actually need to go shopping at all, but I couldn’t stand Neme up with an eager smile like that. I had another errand to take care of that involved her, however, so I figured I’d get that out of the way while we were out together.

Down the road to the right from Arrivers’ HQ was the market, and down the road to the left was the dungeon gate. As such, we always took a right turn when we were going shopping... so Neme was rightfully confused when I took a left instead.

“Huh? Note, the market’s the other way...”

She was right, of course, but I had something else in mind right now.

“It is, but... there’s a bit of a troublesome matter I need to settle before we go,” I explained. “Do you mind if shopping waits?”

“I suppose not...”

She looked a little discontent, so I added, “This concerns you, Miss Neme.”

“Wha?”

She looked up at me in puzzlement, seemingly oblivious to the matter at hand. I couldn’t blame her, though. I was probably the only Arriver who’d noticed.

I took a few steps to the left past our front door, walking over to the gap between our house and the next. Neme watched quizzically as I stared down the gap, which was far too narrow to be a proper alleyway.

“Is something wrong?” she asked hesitantly.

“Can you see anything there, Neme?”

“No... Wait, is it a ghost?! Neme can’t stand ghosts! Save me, Note!”

“No, it’s not a ghost... Personally, I think it’s something much worse.”

“What could possibly be worse than a ghost?!”

“Have you had a bad experience or something?”

We weren’t getting anywhere just talking like this, so I decided to be a little more proactive. I looked down the corridor and said loudly...

“Why don’t you show yourself?”

“...”

“I know you’re hiding there.”

“...”

“If you don’t come on out, I’ll just shout your name and—”

“Hold on a minute! Can you actually see me?” a low voice called from the darkness.

It must have seemed like it came from thin air to Neme, who leaped behind me in flight.

“Wah, it’s a ghost!” she shrieked.

“No, Neme. It’s Mr. Hugel. You remember him, don’t you? He’s the guy who hit on you as soon as you met—”

“Apologies for that,” he said, emerging from the shadows and bowing politely.

It was Hugel, wearing his silver broadsword across his back. Neme and I had inadvertently learned more than we cared to about him a couple weeks back.

“Did you need something from our party? If so, the front door’s over there,” I said, pointing to the entrance Neme and I had just emerged from.

Hugel glanced over at it, nodded, then said, “About that... I actually came to talk to you, Note.”

“That’s a lie. I know you’ve been hanging around here.”

I’d intentionally baited him with that question. I’d actually known, courtesy of Enemy Search, that Hugel had been staking out our HQ for several days now. He used some kind of art or artifact to cloak himself, so the other party members hadn’t noticed him.

I myself had only detected a hint of an odd presence at first, but once I focused on it, his image gradually became clearer. And now that I was familiar with the way he disguised his presence, I could detect him without error.

“Are you stalking Neme, by any chance?” I said, voicing my theory.

“No, no!” he insisted, waving his hands in denial.

“Then why are you hiding, exactly?”

“Er...” He faltered, looking around aimlessly before nodding. “You caught me. I’m a stalker.”

“Wait, what?! Honesty is a virtue and all, but I’m not so sure you should straight-up cop to that...”

I could already feel a headache coming on. How was it that the people around me all seemed to have a few screws loose? I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Please do something,” begged Neme, trembling as she tugged on my sleeve.

“What, though?” I asked in exasperation.

“It’s your fault he’s here! Take responsibility!”

“I don’t think that’s quite right... Why don’t you just turn him down again?”

“Oh, right! Sorry, but Neme isn’t interested!” Neme declared, emphatically turning to Hugel with an apologetic bow.

Hugel blinked in bewilderment upon being rejected with a run-up.

“D-Did I just get shot down again...?”

“I mean, duh? What did you *think* was gonna happen here?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

Hugel continued to grumble in a voice so low that I couldn’t quite make out what he was saying. I considered asking him to repeat it, but I could feel the stitches in my sleeve starting to pop. I looked down to see Neme pulling so hard that I thought she might rip my shirt clean off.

“Let’s get out of here and go shopping already!”

I didn’t want her to tear my shirt, nor did I care to hang around chatting with an honest-to-goodness predator any longer than I had to. I issued him a final warning for Neme’s sake...

“I don’t want to catch you following Neme around anymore, Hugel.”

He politely bowed his head and apologized, “I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused.”

I was a little surprised by how readily he seemed to back off, but Neme was still fiercely yanking on my sleeve. I decided to go along with her.

“Oh, actually. One more thing...” I said. There was something I’d forgotten to do. I took a deep breath, then shouted from the pit of my stomach, “GUARDS!”

“I was hoping you’d forgiven me...”

As if. As someone who was once falsely arrested as a predator, I would *never* overlook the real deal.

Another good deed done for the day.

Revenge Match

Once I was released from the unique floating sensation of using the warp crystal, damp air filled my nostrils. It was almost nostalgic; the mere smell of this place conjured countless memories. So much had happened down here... And it had already been a month since then, huh? How strange. It simultaneously felt like it was just yesterday and a lifetime ago.

Erin and I had returned to the labyrinth of endless despair, floor 20. The whole ordeal was still fresh in my mind. We were first blown down here from floor 17, where we'd tripped a teleport trap. The two of us—a Mapping thief with no combat skill and a ranged-only mage—came together to survive, somehow, by the skin of our teeth.

I could laugh looking back on it now, but I'd seriously thought we were goners at the time. Even now, Erin had a somber look on her face. The other Arrivers were reverent, too. No one was joking around like usual. I decided to speak up in an attempt to dispel the heavy gloom in the air.

"Let's do this just like we planned!" I said with gusto, my words echoing down the silent corridor.

I personally didn't see this trip pessimistically. If anything, I felt like we had a huge advantage. Two of the six of us were already familiar with this floor, which was a considerable boon compared to the other floors we'd gone into completely cold.

Moreover, with the exception of the boss and mid-boss, the monsters here weren't actually as tough as the ones on floor 19. There were fewer, both in type and number. In exchange, floor 20 was ridiculously long and complicated. It would take several days to reach the exit even on the shortest route—not that that would be a problem for the Arrivers.

We would never get lost with my Mapping, and our item bags were packed full of rations for a long expedition. We'd brought all the necessities we could possibly need. And even if we happened to run out of food, Erin could rustle us up some monster meat meals with Minor Cooking. We literally couldn't be more prepared for this.

For starters, I already had about half of the floor mentally mapped. There was no way we'd run out of supplies before we made it through. That was why I wasn't worried, but my fellow floor 20 veteran seemed to feel differently. Her normally stern look was

exacerbated by a deep furrow in her brow. I couldn't just let that go unaddressed, so I tried talking to her.

"You okay, Erin?"

"I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about," she said, looking into my eyes. "Are you seriously going to fight the mid-boss?"

"Of course. I've finally found my role."

I recalled our boss battle on floor 19 the other day. I'd thrown myself into playing the decoy, distracting and kiting the red mermaid. It was the one thing I was capable of contributing in combat without any attack arts. I wanted to make use of that and participate in the mid-boss battle as a makeshift evasion tank.

I would have been lying if I said I wasn't scared at all, but my desire to try overrode the fear. My evasive arts were good enough to use in the dungeon now—I'd learned that much tangling with the mid-boss here last time.

If I focused wholly on evading without even trying to attack, I was pretty sure I could hold my ground. Plus, I'd seen this mid-boss before. I remembered how it attacked, and this time, I had the support of my entire party behind me. I couldn't call myself a dungeon diver if I ran away under such perfect conditions.

But there was another reason I wanted to challenge the floor 20 mid-boss, too. It was simple: revenge. This was a grudge match for me. The yearning to face such a formidable foe once again smoldered deep within my chest, unquenchable.

The silver-armored warrior standing tall in the center of the chamber, naginata in hand. A thick miasma visible to the eye enshrouding its body. The face of a bloodthirsty demon decorating its mask. If I closed my eyes, I could see it clearly in my mind... And it wasn't just a creature of my imagination. It was real, very real. I could sense it even now. There was an intimidating presence detectable just ahead in the center of the room beyond the boss door.

There was no point in standing around any longer. Nothing would be resolved by waiting.

"Miss Neme. Your buffs, please."

"Got it."

A feeling of exhilaration filled me as Neme replied—a side effect of her spell that enhanced my physical strength and natural healing abilities. I should be able to withstand using Pseudo Shadow Runner with this. I restlessly moved my fingers, venting the excess energy coursing through my body. It was a strange sensation, but not an unpleasant one.

It's fine. Everything's going to be okay.

"All right, let's do this. Everyone ready?" I asked, looking at my teammates.

Once they all nodded, I expelled all the air from my lungs. My job was to be the mid-boss's opening target.

Pseudo Shadow Runner.

I ran as my body felt like it was freezing over, blazing past the scenery of the narrow corridor. The sconces on the wall lighted the way. It was a straight shot from here to the armored warrior. There was nothing between us now. I projected my Bloodlust at the enemy before me in a declaration of war, signaling the start of our battle.

Our eyes met. The warrior made an intense impression. Goosebumps broke out all over me. We'd make contact in less than a second now. Any given moment from here on out was a matter of life or death.

As soon as I entered the central chamber, I leaped toward the armored warrior.

Stream!

Accelerated by the effects of Pseudo Shadow Runner, I left my own shadow behind. I was moving so fast that I couldn't see anymore. I evaded the incoming naginata solely by what I could sense.

The weaving path I took was like a black shadow trailing beneath the polearm as it swung. I proceeded to activate Backslide and glide out from under it as I rotated, the bottoms of my soles hot with friction as I slid. Though I was leaning in a forward-bent posture, I took care not to lose my balance as I went.

I then tried to get behind the armored warrior, but it didn't go as I'd hoped. The mid-boss bent its armor-clad knees, and then it was gone...

The next thing I knew, it was right in front of me. Its naginata tore through me—or rather, a shadow of me. It wasn't my real body. I'd used the evasive art Phantom, which created an afterimage of its user as they moved at rapid speeds. In other words, the naginata had only caught a shadowy illusion.

The armored warrior was confounded for a split second, and I used that opportunity to activate Withdraw and get some distance. If the circular room was like a clockface, I was moving toward ten o'clock. The entrance was at six o'clock, and I could now detect five presences coming in that way—Jin and the others had finally caught up.

Our MVPs in this fight would be Jin and Erin. Erin would fire moderately powerful spells while Jin and I took turns distracting the mid-boss. Jin would go on the offensive too should he get the chance. We'd worked out this arrangement to make things easier for me. I'd sparred with Jin countless times for training, so I was keenly accustomed to his attack patterns. Erin and I had also been through hell together, so we'd worked out our own special breed of teamwork.

In contrast, I didn't have much experience fighting together with Force or Roslia. I wasn't overly familiar with their fighting styles. Since our opponent wasn't that much larger than your average human, rushing it with too many people at once would make it difficult to coordinate. This was why we'd decided to have two people attack in turn while everyone else hung back—not that they'd be sitting on their hands, mind you. The party members on the rear line would be watching Erin and protecting her from the mid-boss if it came her way. They'd also be ready to step in on my behalf if I needed backup.

Once we were all in position, the Arrivers' attack on the mid-boss began in earnest. Lightning burned the back of the armored warrior's head—Erin's doing, of course. It tried to turn around, but a deep cut was suddenly gouged into its neck—that was Jin. He'd landed the attack in perfect tandem with Erin.

The armored warrior thus turned toward Jin, but he was nowhere to be seen. He'd activated Stealth to hide himself. Of course, Stealth wasn't an almighty art. It was significantly less effective against an enemy who already knew you were there. To make sure he eluded the mid-boss, I activated an intense burst of Bloodlust before the warrior could find him.

That drew its attention to me—or so I thought, but then there was another flash of light. It was the glint of a second slash from Jin. His black blade weaved between the warrior's arms to tear into its right shoulder. Dark red smoke poured from the wound. It was almost like the damage was materializing into fury.

I leaped out of the way as I watched on. The mid-boss's naginata cut an arc in front of my stomach. It wasn't going down without a fight. It had reflexively responded with a sweeping counterattack the moment Jin hit it, but such a wild swing would never hit me, much less a master assassin.

One slash. Then another. Jin's black blade thrust forward like an arrow, then pulled back without pursuing too far. His power was on full display as he countered the armored warrior's counterattack. He then negated his presence with Stealth when a clap of thunder roared through the room. Erin's lightning spell crashed into the warrior, deflecting off its armor and scattering around the room.

Withdraw!

I managed to evade a bolt that came my way... Wait, why had a bolt come my way in the first place? Watch it, Erin!

"Sorry!"

It wasn't like Erin's shaky aim was anything new, and the ricochet wasn't entirely unexpected... but I was still a little peeved. What would she have done if I hadn't dodged it? I mean, she'd probably fired assuming that I would. She'd even apologized, but she sure didn't

look sorry to me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, and in that moment, the mid-boss turned its attention to Erin. I used Bloodlust in a panic, and the sharp glint of its eyes fell on me accordingly. I let the armored warrior's low kick sail by before evading a follow-up sweep of its naginata by bending my back. I then jumped away, cutting an arc through the air as I leaped.

Jin covered me as I landed, attacking from a low position that made use of his rotation. His black blade lashed out like a whip, wreaking havoc on the warrior's armor. It was a clean hit, probably the most damaging one so far. It left a deep wound that ran from one side of the mid-boss's waist to its opposite shoulder. Dark red smoke billowed out and rose toward the ceiling.

Jin specialized in fighting humanoid monsters. This was something I'd come to realize over the course of the nineteen floors we'd cleared together so far. I once asked him about it, and he admitted it readily. Compared to other combat-oriented battle styles, assassins didn't have any big, bold attacks. Their specialty was killing people quickly and quietly.

That was why Jin was most effective against human-like foes. This armored warrior's strength was far beyond anything human, but its movements were fundamentally similar. It was right in Jin's wheelhouse. It was reassuring, really. I felt like he could probably win this fight alone, even without Erin's support, so I was perfectly comfortable leaving things to him. I activated Stealth and pulled back a little accordingly. I had to be careful not to get in his way.

I took the chance to shake out my hands and look myself over. Everything seemed to be good. I was still in perfect working order. I then nodded to myself, stepped forward again, and activated Bloodlust. This should be a piece of cake. After having my presence cloaked with Stealth, Bloodlust was bound to get the mid-boss's attention.

To the upper left. The right side. A pole thrust. One thrust, followed by another. Then a slash. To the upper left again. An upward slash. An overhead slam. One thrust. Then two. Then three consecutive ones. An upward slash. A sweeping horizontal one. I barely had time to breathe as I narrowly evaded its barrage of fierce attacks.

The armored warrior had just braced itself to sweep back from the opposite side when Jin's blade reached its neck, leaving a gash deep enough to sever an artery. Had it been human, that would have been a fatal blow for sure. But this was the mid-boss of floor 20. In lieu of blood, white smoke poured out of the wound. The armored warrior was still going strong.

The smoke dispersed through the room like fog, almost like an aura around the warrior. It now truly looked like an enraged demon. Thanks to Enemy Search, I could feel its threat level skyrocket. The monster seemed to grow stronger each time it was damaged.

I held back a bitter laugh as I called out, “Force, it’s your turn now!”

“Wha? Come on, Note! You can do better than that! Show us some guts!”

“While I’d love nothing more than to oblige, this guy’s gonna be a real thorn in our side if you don’t take it down in one go!”

The original idea was for Jin and I to whittle it down gradually, but it would only gain momentum if we took our time that way. We couldn’t let that happen, so it was time for a quick change of plans. We had to think on our feet since we’d never been through this mid-boss fight before. I quickly pulled myself together so that my disappointment wouldn’t affect my performance.

“Only use heavy attacks. It gets stronger every time it takes damage.”

“Ah, so that’s the deal.”

With that, Force seemed to understand. He swiftly drew Purgatory from its sheath like he was flipping a switch inside himself—he was now in serious mode. A blazing demon against an armored one. A swordsman consumed by the flames of hell against a warrior burning with hatred.

It was a melee from there. Force and Jin double-teamed the warrior while Erin continued to fire from range. The mid-boss had to change directions continuously to try to attack, making it difficult to track its opponents. It was difficult for me to keep up with, even. If I let the mid-boss’s attention get away from us for a second, one of us might pay for it with our lives.

This was floor 20. Even indirect hits could kill. I had to stay on my toes right behind Jin and Force every step of the way.

A tempest. A shockwave that could be described no other way forced me to stoop forward. It was the vicious aftereffect of the armored warrior’s naginata, which far outperformed what any normal weapon could do.

I thought I’d evaded the attack with room to spare, but my back was scratched up. The cuts weren’t too deep, but they weren’t anything to sneeze at either. Light sparkled around my body—it was Neme’s healing spell.

And it wasn’t just around me, either. Jin and Force hadn’t gotten this far into the fight unscathed. The armored warrior was getting stronger each time we hit it. Its left arm had now been torn to shreds,

and its right hand wasn't entirely intact. Its helmet had been smashed in, and large gashes ran up and down its torso.

It would have been dead long ago if it were human. But in this battered state, its unique ability powered it to the max. Its silver armor was now black with miasma, emitting a sinister glow. It looked like some apparition. A ghost that continued to fight even after death.

Nowhere in the chamber was safe any longer. A single slash from the armored warrior's blade could now reach the walls of the room with deadly effect. It heaved its naginata upward, aiming for Neme as she continued to cast healing magic. She was roughly fifty meters away—well within reach.

Roslia activated her signature barrier, Impenetrable Fortress, from behind Neme. It was the strongest defensive spell she had. The naginata collided violently with it at full force. It skidded up the wall of light, crashing into the ceiling. Roslia's barrier had won out.

I looked to the armored warrior, whose naginata was nearly jammed into the ground by its left foot from the recoil of that last attack. This was our chance. Perhaps our biggest one yet. If we didn't seize this opportunity, we'd be in for another fierce onslaught... and we couldn't risk that.

As such, we needed to go on the offensive now. We had to attack, attack, attack, and win. I braced my feet, preparing to accelerate. I knew everyone else was probably thinking the same thing right now, even without exchanging a word. We were all ready to end this.

The first to move was Jin. He leaped forward enshrouded in Shadow Runner, the far superior version of my Pseudo Shadow Runner. His speed was incredible, but he was obstructed by the mid-boss's naginata. He couldn't quite close in all the way.

That meant it was my turn. I zipped ahead, going from zero to a hundred in a single burst. My thighs burned. I could tell my muscles were screaming. But I didn't care. I'd be fine as long as I had Neme's Regenerate.

So I continued to charge at that high speed. The armored warrior's eyes locked on to me.

Here it comes!

I stopped short and used Withdraw. The momentum I'd built up had nowhere to go, sending me flying in an unexpected direction. My ankles twisted unnaturally.

But thanks to that, I was able to evade the armored warrior's slash. I didn't have to worry about the rest after that. The other members would handle it.

First came Jin's attack—a deep slash on the warrior's left cheek. The moment it turned its attention to Jin, its body collapsed on the ground.

That was the doing of our third MVP. Our party leader had finally shown his stuff. The mid-boss's head was flying through the air, helmet and all. It traced an arc and then hit the floor. Force towered on the other side of the collapsed warrior, his blade held high.

The fight was now over. The mid-boss's presence had vanished from my mental map. My revenge match was a complete and utter victory.

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We continued to explore after defeating the mid-boss, going on to clear the rest of floor 20. The expedition took over two weeks, at which point we finally reached the boss chamber. The boss itself was far more formidable than the mid-boss had been... So much so that we had to retreat at first, but we were able to clinch the fight on our second try and return home victorious.

The Arrivers were now the only active party to have cleared the middle floors—that is, floors 10 to 20—of the dungeon. It was a tremendous achievement that took the bustling town of Puriff by storm. It became obvious when we next went to visit the dungeon guild after the fact. People were talking...

“Hey, isn’t that Jin from the Arrivers?”

“You mean the party that just cleared floor 20?”

“Who’s that with him?”

“Dunno.”

“Isn’t that the Girl Snatcher?”

“What? So he kidnaps girls?”

I stood there silent for a moment, then turned to my partymate.

“Jin, please beat those people up for me.”

“Don’t say such violent things. Also, that’s not really the kind of thing you should ask someone to do in your stead...”

“But I’d never win on my own.”

I glared at the adventurers watching us from the corner of the room. They all looked bigger and stronger than me. And if they were here at the guild, they were probably dungeon divers—a cut above your average adventurer. No way in hell was I picking a fight with them.

“Anyway, it sure has been a while since I’ve visited the dungeon guild.”

“Huh? This isn’t your first time here, Note?”

“Er... No, I came here once on some minor business...”

Said “minor business” was staking out the place with Riece. We were trying to find a potential lover for Cathy to lift her spirits and get her to agree to mentor Erin. That was how we’d met Hugel, which turned into a huge disaster after we regrettably discovered that he was

a predator. The whole thing was just one giant embarrassment, so I didn't care to rehash it for Jin.

Anyway, Jin and I were at the guild today to take care of some paperwork. There were apparently all kinds of procedures that had to be followed in order to update the Arrivers' new floor record. I'd spotted Jin leaving the house on his way here and offered to come along, since I was free.

"This is the first I've heard about having to report clearing floors to the guild, though," I said, eyeing the form Jin was filling out beside the reception desk.

He replied without looking up, "There are lots of other things to report too."

"Really? Isn't it exhausting to handle all this yourself?"

"It is, but at least I know it gets done right this way. There were a couple of times back in the early days where we got suspended from dungeon diving because Force messed up the paperwork, you know?"

"Wow, you've really had it rough, huh?"

"Like I said, that was back in the early days. There was so much we didn't know. Every little thing was a challenge... But it was all a lot of fun."

"It was just the two of you to start, right? I heard that Neme and others joined up later."

"Yup, that's right. We couldn't find any other members in the beginning. That was hard. Force had exceptionally high standards for letting people join. And since we didn't have any experience dungeon diving, we couldn't exactly recruit by reputation."

"But you got Neme to join, didn't you?"

"We came across her back when she was still too shy to find a party for herself, so she became our third member after a rather long series of negotiations."

"And you've had other party members come and go since, right?"

"Most quit within three days. But more recently, we got Erin. Then you and Roslia. And that's how we ended up with the Arrivers as we currently stand."

"It's kind of strange to think about the Arrivers any other way. It's almost like talking about a different party."

"Well, that's perfectly natural. You've only ever known the Arrivers with our current lineup. But it's different for me. From way back when it was just me and Force, up to the present with the six of us... Those days are all precious memories to me."

Jin had a proud look on his face when he said that. It made me a little jealous of what he had that I so desperately lacked.

The sun was setting when we left the dungeon guild. We'd gotten

a pretty late start to begin with, so the stars were twinkling in the twilight sky overhead by the time we finally wrapped up all the complicated paperwork.

The smell of dinner cooking wafted from nearly every house in the residential district. Erin probably had something waiting for us at home, too... I was so distracted with the unique bustle of town as night fell, we were there before I knew it. Jin went to open the front door for us.

“I’m going to check the mail,” I said, strolling over to the box.

Jin normally checked the mail in the morning and evening. No one else usually bothered unless they were personally expecting something.

I yanked open the light blue wooden box and peeked inside. There was a single piece of mail. It was a regular, rectangular envelope—unremarkable except for the fact that it was jet black.

“There’s a letter for you, Jin,” I called to him.

He was just about to step inside, but stopped and turned around to take the letter from me.

“Here you go,” I said.

When I handed him the black envelope, he raised an eyebrow.

“I wonder who it’s from,” he mused, cutting it open without hesitation. “I wasn’t expecting mail.”

Come to think of it, there was no sender or return address on the letter. Not even our address—just Jin’s short name. I was about to point that out to him...

But I swallowed my words when I looked up and saw the expression on his face. His lips were trembling as he read the letter, his narrow eyes were opened wide, and his mouth hung half open. He looked afraid and surprised at the same time. I’d never seen him so shaken.

Confused, I uttered the first question that came to mind: “What does it say?”

I never expected him to simply hand me the letter in response. I was a little taken aback, but I accepted it from him. I couldn’t help remarking how weak his grip on it seemed. Something was *very* strange here.

Slowly, hesitantly, I looked down at the letter...

Jin,

I will be coming for your head tomorrow evening. You already know the reason why.

-The Headhunter

“Jin, what is this...?” I asked hoarsely. The quivering in my voice

shocked even me.

We both stood there silently for a long moment with nothing but the ambient noises of the city at night hanging in the air between us. I eventually opened my mouth to try asking again...

But Jin answered first in a soft voice, "It seems to be a death threat from the Headhunter."

The Headhunter...

That was the hitman Riece had mentioned the other day. According to her, he was the strongest in all the nation. He would use Stealth to completely conceal his presence, then cleanly decapitate his target without ever being detected. Mastery of that one tactic ensured a kill every single time. Not even top class fighters like Force and Jin would stand a chance against him—or so Riece claimed.

But one way or another, this so-called ultimate assassin had apparently just declared Jin his next target. It was a bit hard to swallow.

"Is this even real?" I blurted in unthinking denial.

"Most likely," Jin replied, having regained his cool.

I was surprised by how quickly he'd pulled himself together... but his usual calm, collected manner belied the gravity of the current situation. It felt out of place right now.

"If it's real," I began, "why would he send a letter like that? I mean, if he really wanted to kill you, why warn you in advance? This has just got to be some sick prank or an imposter or something..."

"No, that's simply the kind of assassin he is. I understand your reservations, but you probably don't know about the Headhunter's true nature."

"His true nature?"

"I mean to say he doesn't choose his victims at random," Jin clarified, pointing to the second sentence of the letter.

You already know the reason why.

There was something truly unsettling about that. I couldn't think of a single reason someone would want Jin dead. But for the Headhunter to use such vague language, Jin must have had some idea what it was about. Maybe something from his past.

I wanted to ask about it, but Jin spoke up again before I could...

"The Headhunter is actually a vigilante. A hitman for justice, you could say."

"What...?"

I had a really hard time parsing "hitman for justice." Hearing those words together was as bizarre as a midsummer snow.

"He normally only kills on request, but all his targets are limited to criminals. He carefully investigates each case himself, then visits punishment on those he deems to be truly evil. That's why he goes out

of his way to send letters like this—to pronounce a death sentence and inspire regret for one's crimes."

"Then why is he after you?!"

"Because..."

I stared at my reflection in Jin's eyes, which were gradually adjusting to the oncoming dark of night.

"I've killed many, many people," he said. "More than even the Headhunter. Some of them were completely innocent."

There was a self-deprecating tone in his voice, but even deeper emotion beneath that. Glimpses of Jin's past flickered in and out of view... This was the first time I'd truly seen them for myself, but I didn't care. I didn't know the Jin of the past. I only knew him as he was now.

To be honest, even after he'd told me himself, I still had a hard time believing he used to be an assassin. The Jin I knew was kind and reliable. He was my savior who'd pulled me back from the brink of despair. And this Headhunter knew nothing about him. To want to cut him down based on some misguided sense of justice... It was absurd!

"You live a perfectly respectable life now, Jin! He has absolutely no right to murder—"

"That's where you're wrong, Note. As long as there's a client, he has a reason to kill. And there are plenty of people who resent me. Too many, in fact. I have no way of narrowing it down to any one person. Nor can I blame them for the way they feel. Each of them was robbed of a family member, loved one, or other precious friend... by my hand."

I hardly knew what to say to that. Jin was precious to me, but he'd taken away people that were equally precious to others... That truth was a frightfully heavy weight on my chest. Something that I could only appreciate now that I *had* people precious to me. I didn't want to lose Jin, Erin, or anyone else. The very idea was repugnant.

"Are you just going to accept your death?" I mustered the courage to ask.

"Nope," he responded flatly, much to my surprise. "It's true I bear a certain guilt for what I've done, but that's another matter entirely. Honestly, I want to keep on adventuring with you and the rest of the Arrivers. I wouldn't trade that dream for anything, so I'm certainly not going to sit back and let myself be killed. Not even after what I've done. I'm not that much of a saint, Note."

There, Jin tried to force a smile. The corners of his mouth turned up in a grin, but there was no light in his eyes. He was just putting on a brave face.

"However," he said, inhaling deeply, "should this be my demise, I leave the Arrivers in your hands."

“Why would you even say such a thing?”

As if I'd allow that to happen. Even hypothetically speaking, I wasn't about to agree to that. No way in hell. There were certain lines you just didn't cross. In fact, I was a little irritated he'd even suggested it. It showed in my voice.

“You're not alone, Jin,” I said, a little rougher than I ordinarily would have. “We've got Force, Roslia, Erin, and Neme. With our strength—with the six of us—we can handle the Headhunter.”

“Sorry, but I don't intend on relying on the party for this.”

“Why not?!”

“The Headhunter isn't an enemy that can be defeated simply by surrounding him. Outnumbering him yields no advantage if no one can even detect him. In truth, getting more people involved only increases the risk we'd be taking. Moreover, this is a personal problem. I have no intention of dragging anyone else into it.”

“But—”

“No buts. Please, Note. I need you to keep this between us. You wouldn't want to lose anyone precious to you because you got them caught up in your business, would you? I hope you can understand.”

That was fair. If any of our teammates died because of me, it would probably be the regret of a lifetime. Besides... it wasn't really my place to defy Jin's resolution. I'd asked something similar of Erin once when we were stuck on floor 20. I'd forced her to run ahead while I faced the mid-boss alone.

Back then, I wasn't even really thinking about the possibility of my own death. I was mostly focused on Erin's survival. Luck was on our side and we both ended up making it out of there alive. Only in retrospect did I realize just how dangerous a risk I'd taken... But I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. My life was a small price to pay for the safety of someone I cared about, plain and simple.

That being the case, I understood how Jin felt all too well. Nevertheless, there was something flawed about that line of thinking. It didn't take into consideration the feelings of those left behind. That was the cruelty I'd foisted upon Erin... something I hadn't truly appreciated until just now.

“Don't look so sad, Note. It's not like my death is a foregone conclusion.”

That much was true, but I still didn't like this. I didn't even want to think about life without Jin. He'd saved me, given me hopes and dreams for the future when I was at my lowest. He'd taken me in when I had nowhere else to belong. He'd changed my world.

He was the first Arriver I met, and the one who'd taught me everything I knew about being an adventurer. Whenever I had a fight with Erin or got sick of things, he was always there for me. I wouldn't

have made it here if it weren't for Jin, and I wanted to see how far we could continue to go together.

In the heat of the moment, I—clumsily and earnestly—tried conveying all that. I didn't mince words. I bared my heart to him. One embarrassing thing after another came flowing out of my mouth.

When I was done, he scratched his head bashfully and said, "I'm glad you feel that way, Note. It's a little bit of a weight off my shoulders. Maybe it was worth washing my hands of assassination and forming the Arrivers after all. You know, I started this party because I wanted to leave something behind..."

"What do you mean?"

"A name, an achievement, anything... I just wanted to create *something*. My whole life before the Arrivers was centered on taking things from other people. I thought, maybe if I could raise an adventurer like you, that I'd be giving something for a change..."

"What are you saying?!"

Seriously, how could he say that?! Because I... No, because *we*—

"It's not just me, Jin. Force is grateful too. More than he'll ever be able to tell you. And I'm sure the same goes for Erin and Neme—even Roslia. You're the heart of this party. You're what brings us all together. You've given us each exactly what we needed, and we'll never be able to thank you enough for it. We all need you here, so please... Don't talk like that."

"I see..."

There, Jin looked up. The stars sparkled brilliantly against the dark backdrop of the sky, as if to proclaim their existence. Though each individual light was small, together they seemed to illuminate the night.

"I've already made a difference without realizing it. And in return, you've all made such a difference for me... I'm just glad I was able to give something back."



Raising the Curtain

As far as the nameless boy was concerned, names were just symbols.

His parents were dead by the time he was two years old, so he had no way of knowing the name he was born with. After being placed in an orphanage, he was given the name Zenon, but that only lasted for a few years. He had sharp reflexes and quick wits, but a certain noble decided to take him in primarily due to his lack of living relatives.

He was then assigned not a name, but a number: Number 168.

“From now on, you are no longer your own person. You’re subhuman. A mere puppet of Lord Deanlurk’s,” the man who retrieved Number 168 from the orphanage said.

And it certainly seemed true, for the facility the boy was taken to was by no means fit for humans. There, he had combat techniques beaten into him day and night. And when that was over, he was forced to spend hours studying how to survive in his world.

The meals were tasteless, provided solely for the purpose of replenishing energy. Toilet breaks were only allowed at fixed times. Cold water baths were given once a week. No one slept well there, for they could all be called to training at a moment’s notice. In short, it was a prison meant to manufacture soldiers for the service of the noble who ran it.

Number 168 was brought in with others like him, but none of them survived. Number 165 caught a cold and died of dehydration. Number 166 suffered internal injuries during a training exercise and was discovered cold the next morning. Number 167 was fifty seconds late to assembly and killed for it. Numbers 169 and 170 tried to escape the facility and were hung before the lot of them as an example.

To Number 168, the deaths of his fellow trainees weren’t worth his tears. He regarded them with the same indifference as his shoelaces... No, even worse than that. He’d have to retie his laces if they came undone, but the deaths of the other inmates didn’t warrant even the smallest pause in his day.

Number 168 happened to be more nimble than most—a talent that allowed him to survive the grueling training he was put through. He was clever too, and thus took to the studying forced upon them better than most. All in all, he did well for himself in an environment

that offered no mercy and no reprieve. He simply and obediently fulfilled his given tasks without batting an eye at the deaths of his peers.

There were others that were stronger or smarter than Number 168, but none of them outlived him. They all perished for some blunder or another.

Number 168 continued to live under such treacherous conditions until the day he turned twelve—old enough to become a full-fledged soldier. Most people considered the presentation ceremony at the age of fifteen a rite of passage into adulthood, but Deanlurk liked to start early. He put children through hell to cultivate agents every bit as good as skillholders, then put them to work young enough that they posed no threat to him.

His unit at the time consisted of twenty people. Each member was assigned all kinds of tasks including intelligence gathering, reconnaissance, honey trapping, and assassination. By trying their hand at each job, their individual aptitude for them could be measured.

Number 168 executed every mission given to him without exception. And for better or worse, the job he excelled at the most was assassination. Perhaps it was because of his indifference to the taking of human life, which set him apart from the other agents. The brutal training they'd all been through wasn't enough to completely harden their hearts to murder.

Several other agents were successfully able to complete assassination missions, but it took a toll on them mentally. Most avoided such jobs like the plague. But that didn't mean they would go away... Someone had to do them.

It only stood to reason that the agent who didn't mind dirtying their hands should handle them. That was what Number 168 thought. It wasn't that he felt no remorse whatsoever on such jobs; it was more so simply resignation. If the target was fated to die one way or another, then their death was inevitable—even if it wasn't by his hand.

On top of that, assassinations required comparatively less interaction with a target than other jobs. There was no prolonged contact like on undercover intelligence missions. In other words, Number 168 and his target could remain complete strangers. After all, it was easier to kill a stranger than to deceive someone who trusted you.

Number 168 couldn't understand the agents who eagerly snatched up undercover work. He himself contentedly stuck to taking up the assassination jobs. Each time he completed another one, he further refined his technique. He became intimately familiar with where and

how to fatally wound someone.

Thus, Number 168 went on to become a prolific, peerless killer. Obtaining his skills at age fifteen only abetted his craft. He continued to kill, even as people fearfully began whispering in the streets about Deanlurk's deadly assassin.

That was simply how he lived until one day some time after his twentieth birthday. That was the day he failed a mission for the first time. The day he abandoned his work for good. The day he made a deal with a certain swordsman.

On that particular mission, the name Number 168 had been using was Jin. It would be the first name that grew to have any meaning to him.

The End-Defying Choice

The sun began its climb through the sky the next morning as the town woke into its usual hustle and bustle. I gazed at my clock vacantly as I got ready to go.

I fully armed myself—though I only had a single dagger. I donned my combat gear for the dungeon, including my leather gloves and shoes. I then went for the door, which was when someone called out to me...

“Huh? Are you going out?”

It was Erin. She had just finished cleaning up after breakfast, and was currently drying off her hands.

“Didn’t I tell you?” I replied. “I’ve got a training session with Riece.”

“Ah, right, you did mention that yesterday...”

“Yeah, so I’m headed out. Things could run late today, so don’t wait for me for dinner.”

“Sure... When do you think you’ll be back, then?”

“Couldn’t call it. I might be back right away, or I might not come back at all.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Are you camping out or something?”

“Yeah, you could say that. Don’t worry about it.”

“Fine. Have a good day,” she said with a wave.

It was a perfunctory, routine greeting. But today, it felt especially precious.

“I’m off,” I said, pushing open our front door. It felt even heavier than usual.

I left the party house without looking back so that Erin couldn’t see my face as I walked away. Jin and I actually had a lot in common... We were both unfair to the people we cared about. Rather, we were both quick to put our lives on the line for the people we cared about.

If he’s not going to rely on the party, neither will I. It’s as simple as that.

“Long time no see. Or so I’d say, but it hasn’t really been that long,” I remarked, greeting the man in front of me flatly.

“What’s up? It’s rather early in the morning to be meeting up like

this,” he replied in a slightly rougher tone than usual. He seemed to be on guard.

We were presently standing in the clearing outside of town where I normally trained with Riece. The area was sparse of vegetation and people, so it was ideal for combat practice. It hadn’t been difficult to bring the man here, either. I could track him down instantly between Mapping and Enemy Search, and we were acquainted well enough. All I’d had to do was ask him to follow me.

But now that we were here, there was no point in beating around the bush. I cut straight to the point.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Hugel,” I said. “Or should I just call you Mr. Headhunter?”

He immediately dropped his center of gravity and reached for the broadsword on his back—a combat stance. That was as good as copping to it.

I braced myself for a fight, but the only thing that came at me was a question.

“How did you know?” he asked pointedly.

“Honestly, the clincher was simple. Your Stealth is too good.”

At first, I thought Hugel had staked out our party house because he was stalking Neme. But after seeing the envelope with no address and hearing about the Headhunter’s MO from Jin, I realized I had the wrong idea.

If that letter had come without postage or even an address, that meant someone had put it in our mailbox directly. In other words, the Headhunter was in Puriff when that letter was delivered. Likely even before then, as he would have needed time to investigate his quarry.

For a successful assassination, a killer needs to size up their target. They also need to know their habits, schedule, et cetera. Hugel was scoping all that out while he was hanging around HQ.

Of course, there was a possibility he was just the Headhunter’s lackey and not the man himself—but that was where his Stealth betrayed him. That was what I’d meant when I said it was the clincher. That wasn’t the only clue, however.

You couldn’t behead someone with just any weapon, after all. You’d need a blade at least as big as the ones Force used, and the broadsword Hugel always carried on him fit the bill perfectly. He’d probably chosen to pose as a newbie dungeon diver as an excuse to walk around armed. Checking out the dungeon-diving scene was also likely a good way to gather information on Jin. Two birds with one stone and all that.

Besides, in spite of all the rumors about the Headhunter, I’d never heard anyone say that he was based out of Puriff. The fact Hugel was new in town was suspect in that regard. All signs pointed to him as

the Headhunter.

“You’re a nightmare of an opponent for me. I was wary the moment you sniffed me out in that alley, but to think you’d deduce my identity... This is a rather ugly situation.”

Oh?

What was he so concerned about? Was it the fact that I was thwarting his assassination attempt? Or was it that I’d pegged him? Figuring that out would tell me a lot about him. There might even be room to negotiate here.

“So Hugel’s your real name, then?”

“Yeah. I was convinced that no one would ever find me out. I’ll make sure to assume a fake identity the next time I go undercover.”

The next time, huh?

So he was confident he’d get through this. He certainly wasn’t showing any sign of backing down, either. That had to mean he was more concerned about me knowing his identity. He clearly didn’t think I was going to stop him from doing his job.

I had to check myself on that front as well. Falling back on brute force here would be an absolute last resort. I’d have to talk things out somehow... so I decided to put a little pressure on him.

“You’re not actually that strong, are you?” I asked.

“Watch your mouth.”

“I’m just confirming the truth. I can tell thanks to Enemy Search. Your actual prowess is hardly worthy of your infamy. Without your extraordinary powers of concealment, you wouldn’t be much tougher than the average adventurer.”

If it weren’t for Stealth, the Headhunter would be no match for Jin or Force. He was only considered the strongest because he’d dedicated himself to a single art and compensated for everything else with brawn. Granted, he could still kick my ass.

“You can tell that much?” he asked, somewhat surprised. “This matchup really is a nightmare for me.”

“But it’s like a dream come true for me.”

Like Hugel, I was specially trained. I’d completely sacrificed my offensive potential to maximize my utility in the dungeon. And the art I’d honed the most after all this time was Enemy Search, which had perfect synergy with Mapping. I’d polished it to extremes while fighting for my life on floor 20. So much so that I’d even surpassed Jin, a top-tier assassin.

Stealth and Enemy Search—the art to conceal oneself and the art to detect others—were diametrically opposed. The latter, however, had an advantage over the former. Stealth wasn’t surefire. It merely made it harder for monsters to notice you. Once they had their sights locked on you, activating Stealth wouldn’t do you any good. The same

was true against people.

It normally wasn't possible to completely cloak one's presence, so when Stealth was up against Enemy Search of the same level, Enemy Search would win every time. It honestly shocked me that Hugel had his Stealth trained to such a degree.

The average Enemy Search would never be able to detect him. But the fact he couldn't fool me was clear after the incident outside HQ the other day. If Hugel had gone straight for the kill without casing our place, he might have gotten away with it. His Stealth was so advanced that not even I had noticed him at first.

Once I discovered his presence and familiarized myself with it, however, he couldn't escape me. So I understood what Hugel was saying—I really was his worst nightmare. He might've been able to pull a fast one on Jin, but not me. And I didn't hold a candle to Jin in terms of sheer strength. We had ourselves a peculiar three-way standoff.

As such, I didn't have a whole lot of leverage here in terms of negotiating.

"Like I said, Mr. Hugel, I have a favor to ask. Would you please give up on Jin?"

"Sorry, but I can't."

"There's no harm in backing down now. I'll keep the fact you're the Headhunter a secret, and we can both walk away like this never happened. Won't you at least consider it?"

"I told you I can't."

"Why not? We can put it behind us and just say you failed one job. No big deal, right? Jin isn't even a bad guy anymore! So please!"

"It's a matter of pride," he said calmly. "It's true that Jin has washed his hands of his criminal ways. My investigation has shown me he lives an honest life these days, but that's the problem. There's no justice for his victims this way. There are too many people in this world that wish misery upon those who wreak misery. And the happier misery-makers are, the more their victims begrudge them."

"But," he continued, "is that really so wrong? Those who can forgive their wrongdoers are exceptional, kind people. They're strong... but most of us aren't. And I've personally decided to side with the weak."

"Don't be a hypocrite! You're causing plenty of misery for other people!"

"That's right. I am aware of the dark path I tread. I am weak myself, but I have no intention of turning back now," Hugel declared with a fiery resolve in his eyes.

Those who acknowledge their own weaknesses... They're the strongest of all. It's no easy task to move forward carrying that weight.

I didn't know what happened to Hugel in the past to forge him this way. But whatever it was, I knew it was probably beyond my comprehension. There was no way anything I had to say would change his mind. There was no way to resolve this with words. A fight was unavoidable—it had been from the start.

"I think I understand you a little better now, Hugel. You're a good guy deep down, aren't you? So I'm begging you... Don't make me do this. If you won't back off of Jin, I'll have to stop you myself."

"You have the guts to do that?"

"I made peace with it yesterday."

Hugel stared at me, his gaze piercing right through me. He looked into my eyes, judging what he saw within them. After a silent moment, he shook his head in resignation.

"I see. It seems you're serious. You have the same look in your eyes that I did when I was younger. That's why I wish you'd back down, though I know you likely won't."

"That's right. I won't," I pledged to the great sky overhead.

If Hugel wouldn't relent, I certainly wouldn't either. It was a testament to my own resolution to walk the path I'd chosen.

"Then let's do it this way. Neither of us are willing to back down, but that doesn't mean we have to kill each other over it. I have no desire to end a righteous young man like yourself, nor do I wish to make a killer out of you. So let's fight, and the loser must yield in the end. What do you think?"

"I don't plan on yielding even if I lose."

"Then I'll simply render you unconscious and go kill Jin. It's a little earlier than I had planned, but the plan is moot now anyway. In contrast, you need only make me accept defeat. Sound fair to you?"

"Are you sure? Those terms seem favorable for me."

"That's fine. Consider it a handicap, if you will."

"You seem pretty confident."

"I don't just *seem* confident; I am confident. After all, you're not that strong yourself. I've done my research on all of the Arrivers."

"You never know. I might be hiding a tremendous ability."

"You seem to be forgetting I'm an assassin—though admittedly not a very powerful one. You're not the only one who can use Enemy Search."

Oh, great, Enemy Search gave me away. So much for bluffing, I guess.

I should've known better, though. I was facing the man lauded as the strongest in the nation. Hoping he'd overestimate me and back down was a pipe dream.

"Looks like I can't fool you, Hugel. That's too bad. I guess we'll just have to duke it out, then."

I stood my ground and drew my dagger, holding it up in front of

me defensively. Hugel in turn drew his broadsword and heaved it at the ready. Our eyes locked, and we nodded to one another... a gesture that signaled the beginning of our duel.



The first one to make a move was Hugel. He broke into a run to close the distance between us, thrusting out his broadsword in a horizontal sweep.

Heavy blow after heavy blow came for my neck. I dodged them with Withdraw. Hugel slashed at me even as I retreated, but I could evade that much even without the use of an art. I simply pulled my upper body back and watched as the steel mass passed in front of my eyes. I similarly evaded the next two attacks by moving left and right, then drew away. I corrected my stance as I kept an eye on Hugel.

There was absolutely no need to rush this battle. If I dealt with him calmly, there was no way he could hit me. His attacks weren't even that impressive, save for his horizontal swing. He'd probably beheaded plenty of people with that one.

Hugel had attained superior mastery of Stealth, to the point that he was virtually undetectable. He always got the drop on his target, which was why that horizontal swing worked every time. Go figure his other moves were less proficient. Specialized... Yeah, that was the perfect way to describe him. Not only was his Stealth specialized, but his swordsmanship was too.

In comparison, my fighting style wasn't much different. I was aiming for a one-strike finish with Critical—the one combat art I had in my repertoire. In other words, the both of us were one-trick ponies. The outcome of the match would depend on who executed their trick better.

Hugel had revealed his hand early in the game. He must've been confident he could take me out quickly. Too bad for him. That was a mighty blunder on his part. I now had the upper hand since I was keeping my cards close. Hugel didn't yet know what my trick was—or that I only had one—so if I played things right, I might be able to get the better of him.

This would thus be a battle of endurance. I would wait Hugel out, wearing him down as we went. Then, ideally, I'd take him out with Critical once he was fatigued.

“Hey, why don't you go ahead and give up?”

“That's my line. Do me a favor and surrender already.”

We now exchanged glares, threatening each other between ragged breaths. Sweat poured from both of our brows. We'd been at it for nearly an hour now. The fight had varied in tempo, but keeping it up for this long would tire anyone out.

As for how our duel had progressed, we were at a complete stalemate. The Headhunter's horizontal swing couldn't catch me, and I'd waited for the right moment to use Critical... only to miss and have

a close call with an immediate counterattack.

After that, I went back on the defensive and focused solely on evasion. Honestly, even *I* thought I was stronger than that. I might've been able to break out of our deadlock if I were a little more proficient with Critical, but as things stood, I was practically powerless.

It felt pathetic. I called out to Hugel, basically just buying time to catch my breath and pump some oxygen into my exhausted body.

"I'm surprised you can keep swinging a big sword like that. From what I've seen of your swordsmanship, you don't have a Sword Mastery skill. Maybe Physical Boost? Something like that to compliment whatever you have that enhances your Stealth?"

Hugel was similarly exhausted and willingly took the bait to catch his breath too.

"Who knows?" he said. "I'm not foolish enough to describe my skills to someone I'm actively fighting."

"I suppose that's fair."

Challenging someone with a Physical Boost skill in close combat was a herculean task. I could evade his broadsword all day long, but if he got close enough to take me in a grapple, it would be game over due to the sheer difference in strength. If I approached too carelessly either, the match would be over in an instant.

That was why I'd settled on a hit-and-run strategy. In contrast, Hugel kept on the offensive while suppressing his presence with Stealth. He was probably waiting for my Enemy Search to fail me. Little did he know that wasn't gonna happen. I kept it active on a daily basis, so I was used to maintaining it for extended periods of time. That much was a cakewalk.

However, tracking a faint presence was still difficult and rather inconvenient for several reasons. I wondered if I could get him to drop it...

"Why don't you dismiss Stealth already? Surely it's tiring to keep that up all the time."

"Unfortunately for you, I'm perfectly capable of keeping it up for hours at a time. It seems like your detection arts are at their limit, though."

"Hardly. I can keep Enemy Search active in my sleep."

"Really? You're indeed a troublesome one."

Hugel held his sword at the ready, the flat of his blade parallel to the ground. This was the stance that preceded his deadly right-to-left swing. His go-to trick, the horizontal decapitator.

He leaped into a run, kicking off with his right foot. I'd seen this setup plenty of times before now, so I wasn't fazed.

"I'll have to end things here, then!" he declared confidently.

But it was a bluff. I could read his attack already.

“I should be the one saying that!”

I relaxed my body and prepared myself to use an evasive art at a moment’s notice. I was primed and ready. I might even be able to land a solid counterattack after this.

Yet the moment my mouth unwittingly curled into a grin, my opponent blurted out something unexpected...

“As you wished, I’ll dismiss Stealth!”

With those words, a chill rattled my entire body. My feet turned to stone, refusing to budge under me. A surge of murderous intent shook me to my core.

Bloodlust?!

I messed up. He got me. I knew what happened instantly.

Switching from Stealth to Bloodlust—that was the classic thief combo that Jin had taught me on floor 19. It was a staple trick for attracting the attention of monsters by capitalizing on the contrast between a diminished presence and an intensified one.

And Hugel had just used it against me. My senses were sharpened to the extreme with Enemy Search, so I was particularly vulnerable to it.

I understood exactly what was happening to me, but my body wouldn’t respond the way I wanted it to. I was frozen in place by Bloodlust. No matter what I tried, I couldn’t find strength in my limbs. Not even my fingertips were listening to me anymore.

Smack in the middle of my unfocused vision, I could see Hugel leaping forward. His looming figure was closing in on me in slow motion. In our precariously matched battle, a screwup like this was fatal. I was already in his range, yet my body still wouldn’t listen to me...

The broadsword slicing through the air looked like it was sliding frame by frame. Slowly and smoothly, like it was being drawn to me. I could just imagine the invisible rail guiding it to my neck.

And I listlessly watched it happen as I resigned myself to the end. I’d lost. My shoulders would be liberated of my head any second now. That implicit understanding came to me from an objective perspective.

I think that was why it took me several moments to realize the following spray of blood wasn’t mine.

By the time I snapped back to my senses, Hugel was lying on the ground clutching his shoulder and groaning. Red droplets decorated the dirt, with a growing pool of the stuff forming around the Headhunter.

While I was still taken aback by this turn of events, a familiar voice called out from the edge of the clearing, “I have no idea what’s

going on, but aren't you glad I saved your butt, Girl Snatcher?"

When I heard her, everything clicked into place. I'd won the gamble. I'd held out on the brink of defeat just long enough to secure victory.

I answered my wildcard of a secret weapon, "You're late, Master. Do you know how long ago you were supposed to be here?"

There, a girl dressed in shorts emerged from behind a tree. Her short hair fluttered in the wind, each strand waving like it was dancing. It was Riece, my combat arts instructor.



She tossed a small knife up into the air repeatedly as she approached. I looked back at the still-groaning Hugel to see an identical handle protruding from his right shoulder.

“Y-You’re...” he managed hoarsely from where he lay on the ground. His face was contorted in pain.

Riece ignored his glare and snapped her fingers.

“So, what do you think you’re doing attacking my adorable pupil?” she demanded, catching her knife and pointing it at Hugel.

She was maybe ten large strides away—well within striking distance. Throwing knives were her weapon of choice, and she could easily finish off the injured Hugel from where she stood.

“Looks like asking *you* is pointless... Gimme the sitrep, Girl Snatcher.”

There was no way Hugel, who was now just blinking in a daze, could tell her what was going on. Riece was quite confused herself...

Which was perfectly fair, I mean. I hadn’t given her a heads-up about any of this. I decided to start with the most critical piece of information.

“Hugel’s actually the Headhunter and he’s here to kill Jin.”

“He’s the Headhunter? You mean *the* Headhunter?”

“The very assassin we talked about.”

“Are you messing with me right now...?”

She looked me dead in the eyes and quickly seemed to realize this was no joke. She refocused her attention on Hugel and placed a hand on her hip, shifting into a posture that would allow her to throw a second knife at a moment’s notice.

I then turned to Hugel, who deserved a bit of an explanation as well.

“As I’m sure you know already, this is Riece—a thief from the top-tier party Valkyrie, and the best backup anyone could ask for. I know she’s not quite up to speed, but don’t doubt for a second that she’s on my side,” I said, pointing to my master.

Riece should be perfectly familiar to Hugel, considering she was the one who’d essentially introduced us while she was trying to find a boyfriend for Cathy. He knew her face, at least. I wasn’t sure he knew who she really was, so I made sure to emphasize her party affiliation. I needed him to recognize the threat she posed and accept defeat here.

“Now it’s two against one, and you’re wounded,” I said. “Well? Your defeat is certain, so how about you surrender?”

“Wait, we never agreed to reinforcements. That’s unfair.”

“Why would I *tell* you I had backup coming? Besides, I never said I was going to fight fair. It was my intention from the start to stop you, no matter what it took.”

I held my dagger at the ready, a signal I was prepared to stand my ground to the bitter end if he resisted. Unlike Riece, I didn't have any confidence in my attacks—but if I didn't fake it and put pressure on him here, he might put up a fight. I wanted to avoid that.

Hugel was wounded now, so I was pretty sure Riece and I had a combined 80 percent chance of winning—which meant there was still plenty of opportunity for error. Our opponent was the strongest assassin in this country, after all. I wasn't about to let my guard down around the Headhunter.

Besides, the situation I wanted to avoid most was getting Riece involved in a fight that might get her killed. Since I'd dragged her into this, I wanted to eliminate any possibility whatsoever of that happening.

I steeled myself and watched Hugel's lips carefully. Would the battle continue, or would he back down? The next words out of his mouth would decide our immediate future. A single moment that felt like eternity passed in silence before he nodded readily.

"Fine. I surrender. You win, Note. Happy?"

"You mean you agree to give up on Jin?" I asked, confirming the most important matter. This was the reason we were fighting in the first place.

"Yes," he said, nodding slowly. "I give up. I'll quietly withdraw from here."

"Really?" I asked just in case. This was one point I couldn't yield on.

Before our battle, Hugel and I had a gentleman's agreement. It wasn't legally binding in any way—it was merely a matter of trust. If he double-crossed me after the fact and came for Jin anyway, I wouldn't be able to stop him. I had no choice but to take a gamble and trust the integrity of the so-called "hitman for justice."

"Really. I keep my promises. I may have failed this job, but I suppose that doesn't hurt on rare occasion. How many years has it been since I last screwed up? How nostalgic," he chuckled, clutching at his wound again. "I admit utter defeat. The Headhunter has lost. Now, allow me to take back what I said before our fight. You *are* strong. Not physically—your attack techniques are still green. But you have cunning. You're willing to do what it takes to get the result you want, and that's the most important thing an assassin needs. You'll become a great adventurer."

"I told you. I'm not an assassin, and I have no intention of becoming one. Now, I'll ask again—you're really giving up on Jin, right? If assassins do whatever it takes to get results, then I have no reassurance you're not going to pull something yourself."

"Even I wouldn't go that far. I will keep my promise, and I won't

try to find some loophole to go through with the assassination anyway. I really and truly will walk away from this one,” he insisted, staggering to his feet through the pain.

It was about then that Riece started to freak out.

“H-Hold on just a minute! I still have *no idea* what’s going on here! Why are you both talking like everything’s settled now? And what’s all this about Jin being killed?! I just showed up for training—how did things end up like this?!”

Ugh, what a pain. Just when we were wrapping everything up, too...

Seeing no way out of it, I slowly began recounting what had happened for the ranting Riece. Hugel’s identity. The lie he told. Why he was really after Jin’s life. How things had led to us fighting each other. And finally, the trap I set up to drag her into it.

In my defense, however, it wasn’t some elaborate scheme. I’d simply brought Hugel to our normal training ground about thirty minutes before we were scheduled to meet so that I’d have backup if the duel dragged on too long.

Of course, I didn’t tell Riece about any of this in advance. There wasn’t time. I was simply betting on her showing up and being able to tell what was happening at a glance. Despite her punctuality or lack thereof, she was still a top-tier adventurer who’d been dungeon diving for years. She had to have keen instincts.

That was a risky wager on my part, but it had all worked out in the end. I’d thought I was a dead man when Hugel activated Bloodlust, but that ultimately decided the fight. When he dismissed Stealth, Riece was finally able to track his presence. Furthermore, by projecting such intense Bloodlust, he flagged himself as a serious enemy. From Riece’s point of view, it looked like he was honestly trying to kill me. That was why she hadn’t hesitated to attack.

Now, there were several reasons I’d wanted Riece in particular for backup. First was simply her prowess. I needed a strong adventurer capable of taking out the Headhunter if it came to that. Second and just as important, she was deadly at range. There was no way to defeat the invisible Headhunter in a head-on battle, so I’d wanted someone capable of sniping him from a distance. Finally, the simplest reason of all—she wasn’t Jin. I couldn’t risk putting him in the line of fire in a fight for his life. I needed to be the only target.

The only person I knew that fulfilled all these requirements was Riece. I had remembered we’d arranged to train today, which was what had inspired this plan. She was late, as always, but I couldn’t thank her enough for showing up when she did. I turned her way to express my gratitude, and our eyes met. Riece blinked a few times before leaping at me and grabbing me.

“Wait, what? No! This is all for real?! What the heck are you

doing dragging me into something like this without my knowledge?! I told you I never wanted to fight the Headhunter, didn't I?! I *know* you didn't forget, and look what you went and did anyway! Holy crap, I even threw a knife at him! He's gonna kill me!"

"Please calm down."

"How am I supposed to calm down right now?! I'm so sorry, Mr. Headhunter! I meant no harm! This stupid pupil of mine is to blame! If you want revenge, take it out on him! Spare me, please!"

Wow, where had my reliable instructor gone? The one that was so cool when she'd said, "So, what do you think you're doing attacking my adorable pupil?" She sure changed her tune fast! Way to sell me out...

"Er, I have no intention of taking revenge, so..."

Hugel was also taken aback by Riece's one-eighty and couldn't manage much in the way of an articulate reply. Riece, however, mistook his surprise for displeasure.

"Honestly, I'm really sorry for all the trouble. I'll catch that idiot pupil of mine right away and punish him. Please accept that by way of an apology," she pleaded, rubbing her hands together and bowing her head.

"Um, no. Listen, that's not..." Hugel said feebly.

"You heard the deal, Girl Snatcher! Prepare yourself!"

"For what?! Hey, wait!"

There, Riece set upon me like a wild animal without heeding anyone or anything.

"Take this! Hah!"

"Wha?! Owwww! That hurts! I give! Ouch! HELP!"

As my joints were being bent in all the wrong directions, I spotted Hugel crack a satisfied grin. He must've been pleased to get some form of payback, but damn, I really wished he'd stop laughing and help me already!

God, she's squeezing the air right out of my lungs! I'm gonna die after all!

*

Two swift taps fell upon my bedroom door. The only person polite enough to knock like that was Jin.

"Come on in," I called out.

As I expected, it was Jin who cracked open the door in response. I mean, I'd known it was him anyway thanks to Enemy Search... but I was surprised to see he was dressed like he was headed out.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"No... I was, but..." he answered vaguely, holding up an envelope. It was black and unmarked, just like the one we'd found in our

mailbox yesterday. The sender, then, was presumably the Headhunter.

“What does it say?” I asked just to be sure.

I’d made the Headhunter—or rather, Hugel—promise to keep his word several times over before parting ways. He agreed every time, but I was still gambling on his integrity here.

I paid careful attention to Enemy Search as the previously appointed hour of assassination approached, and Hugel did indeed come by. But all he did was drop another letter in our mailbox before leaving again. I could only assume that was what Jin had in his hand now.

The black envelope was already cut open, meaning Jin must have read it before coming to me.

“About that... It says that something came up, and the Headhunter is redacting his death threat. That he won’t be coming for me again, either. I don’t really get it... Is it okay to trust this?”

Ah, so that’s all it was. I nearly let out a sigh of relief to hear it. All the tension I’d been bottling up since yesterday dissolved at once.

I exhaled the air in my lungs and replied weakly, “Who knows? It won’t hurt to stay on your guard, but I don’t think it’s a forgery or anything. The envelope is the same and all.”

Courtesy of Enemy Search, I knew the Headhunter had dropped it off personally... but that was all I could really say with certainty.

“Well, I suppose. I’ll be careful. But if this is real, don’t you think it’s a little strange?”

“How so?”

“He said something came up, but I can’t imagine what. Did he have a prior engagement? If so, why not just postpone the assassination? Isn’t it odd that he’d promise not to come for me in the future? Can you think of any reason why he’d do that, Note?”

Even though Jin was asking and I had the answer, it wasn’t like I could tell him the truth. I’d acted without consulting anyone, dragging Riece—who wasn’t even in our party—into things along the way. Jin wouldn’t be pleased with how I’d handled it.

Besides, if I told him what I’d done now, it would sound like I was asking for his gratitude. I owed Jin more than I could ever repay. I didn’t deserve thanks for the one time I’d managed to help him out instead...

And so I played dumb.

“Hmm, well... It is a little weird, but I don’t think it’s anything to fret over. He probably just had plans to meet up with a little girl or something.”

“A little girl...?”

Oh, right. Jin didn’t know the Headhunter was Hugel, or that he was a predator. Of course that statement made no sense to him.

“Don’t worry about it.”

For the record, after Riece finally released me from her hold, I’d taken the opportunity to ask Hugel if he was serious about Neme. It wasn’t something I absolutely had to know, but I *was* curious. And the answer, surprisingly, was yes. When I’d discovered him in the alley beside HQ, he’d used it as a convenient excuse to gloss over the fact that he was shadowing Jin... but his sudden romantic proposal wasn’t disingenuous, apparently.

That was how I’d come to learn that the Headhunter was, in fact, a legit predator. What a disappointment of a guy.

But as he had no further business in Puriff, he was now headed back to his base in the capital. He’d apparently given up on Neme after being rejected (twice), so he saw no reason to stay. Neme had no way of knowing that the whole stalking thing was a misunderstanding, so she would continue to think of him as a creep. Of course, I had no intention of clearing that up. Too much trouble.

“But isn’t this great, Jin? You’re free of the Headhunter now,” I said.

“Yeah. I’m relieved. Now I can go adventuring with you all again,” he replied.

Indeed, it was a huge relief. We’d be back in the dungeon in no time.

The next morning, I woke up, leaped out of bed, washed my face, and ran downstairs to find everyone.

I’d kept Enemy Search active all night in case the second letter from the Headhunter was just a ruse. My fears were unfounded, however, as I discovered Jin casually reading the newspaper in the living room. After staying up all night, I was naturally the last one in HQ to get up.

“You slept in again, Note! Sleepyhead!” Neme teased, oblivious to what I’d been through.

There was no way a kind, loving guy like me would get mad over something so petty. No, but I *had* just woken up, you see... so I *did* pick Neme up off the floor and turn her upside-down a little.

“Neme’s sorry! I won’t tease you anymore, so please put me down!”

“As long as you understand...”

I righted Neme before setting her down. Yet once on the ground again, she placed her hands on her hips and smirked at me.

“But you really are a sleepyhead, Note—”

Back in the air she went.

“I’m sorry! Neme really won’t say any more!”

“What are you two flirting for?” Erin interjected as she watched

the two of us goof around.

It was hardly flirting, but I didn't want her to get the wrong idea about it, so I quietly put Neme down. I was prepared to give Erin a piece of my mind, but Roslia beat me to the punch.

"Jealousy is an ugly look, you know? This is why girls who have no confidence in themselves are so pathetic..."

"I do have confidence in myself, thank you. I know I'm fairly decent—"

"Ohmygosh, did you hear that, Note?! How vain can you be, right?"

"You set me up! Besides, I don't want to hear that coming from the walking personification of vanity herself!"

"What?! I don't think I'm good looking at all! You're *waaay* prettier than me, Erin..."

"What are you on about?! You look like you swallowed a bug! It's plain as day you don't believe a single word coming out of your mouth!"

"Gosh, you're just so beautiful, Princess Erin. If I had to describe you poetically, you're like a sunflower sparkling in the summer sun with a bunch of little weeds at its flowery feet—"

"In what way is that supposed to be a compliment?! It's obviously an insult! There's nothing 'sparkling' about the image of weeds!"

"Yeah, no joke. In all seriousness, Roslia's totally hotter."

"You shut up, Force!"

And so the house descended into the usual chaos. If I tried to intervene now, it would just be adding oil to the fire.

That was why I turned to Jin, who was relaxing on the sofa, and said quietly, "Sorry. We're off to a hectic start because I overslept. We'll never get to our strategy meeting for floor 21 at this rate."

"Don't worry. This is all part of the fun. Don't you think so too, Note?" he replied.

"I suppose I can't argue, though I'd personally prefer things a little quieter."

There, we exchanged a grin. We were both savoring the everyday peace of life here at HQ. Who knew what the days ahead would bring?

We worked hard in the dungeon and spent our free time making memories together like this. I couldn't say what "happiness" really meant or what it was supposed to look like, but I was sure this was it... A joy I'd seized with my own hands. A blessing that I carved into my heart.

Epilogue & Prologue

If only we'd been satisfied with that...

After clearing floor 20, fending off the Headhunter, and restoring the peace of our everyday lives, we should have been satisfied. We should've called it all there—the Arrivers, dungeon diving, adventuring, everything. If we had, we could've continued to live out our happiness.

But we chose wrong, and no amount of regret could ever turn back the clock on the biggest mistake of our lives.

None of us realized how arrogant we were. We overestimated ourselves. We believed we would never fail. That we could conquer any wall that stood in our way, someday, together.

Yet life is cruel to us all in equal measure. There is no such thing as eternal happiness. Misfortune mercilessly befalls everyone eventually.

It was just our turn.

We dreamed beyond our means, and we were punished severely for reaching beyond our limits. I wished over and over and over again to rewind time... But such unreasonable wishes always go unanswered.

If there really was a god in this world, could they even do such a thing? Or was it impossible even for them?

I don't know, and I might never. But if I had one chance, a single opportunity to go back, I would tell my past self one thing...

Never go to floor 21.

Midword

It's been a while. Udon Kamono here.

Did you guys know that, due to the way the books are printed, Overlap Bunko's light novels (including pages that aren't allocated for advertisements) always have pages in multiples of 32? Why am I bringing this up out of the blue, you ask? I wanted to explain why you're getting a midword instead of an afterword.

My editor informed me of the signature size before I began writing the first volume. It was annoying to write with something like that in mind, however, so I've been freely ignoring it until now. Volumes 1 and 2 coincidentally turned out to be the perfect length, but no one stays that lucky forever. When I submitted my draft for volume 3, my editor informed me that I was ten pages short, and so you're getting a side story this time!

I considered adding to the main story at first, but I surprisingly couldn't come up with anything else to insert. As such, I decided to write something that suited my fancy—which ended up being the whodunnit-esque side story entitled, “Who Ate the Pudding?” This is probably because mystery novels are all I regularly read outside of light novels. I wanted to try writing something with twists and turns, so please give it a read if you're interested.

Lastly, the acknowledgments. Shizuki, thank you for another volume's worth of beautiful artwork. I look forward to seeing your illustrations every time. Editor Soyama, thank you for all your suggestions regarding the page number issue this time. Also, congratulations on everything. And finally, thank you to all the readers who picked up this book.

-Udon Kamono

Side Story: Who Ate the Pudding?

“Who was it?! Who ate Neme’s pudding?!”

It was the dead of night. The entire party had been dragged out of bed and corralled in the living room. Erin, Force, Jin, Roslia, and I all sat around the table as Neme frantically slammed her fists against it. Still half asleep, I couldn’t quite understand what she was so angry about. Thankfully, Roslia raised her hand first.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

Neme turned bright red at that question, clenching her fists as she answered, “The Frais de Mel Francois pudding that Neme was saving in the refrigerator is gone! I was really looking forward to it, but someone ate it!”

“Hold on a minute. Your Fresh Melty *what?*” Force interjected—and I was grateful, because I was wondering the same thing.

Neme raised a finger and corrected him, “No, it’s Frais de Mel Francois! A very expensive, very popular pudding shop! It’s so in demand that you have to wait in line for three hours to buy anything, and you have to get there early in the morning because they always run out!”

“Okay, so it’s just fancy pudding,” Roslia snarked at Neme’s enthusiasm. She then stood up, looked around at everyone, and loudly declared, “The culprit who ate Neme’s pudding is among us!”

“You don’t say...”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport, Note! Haven’t you ever wanted to say something like that before? Detectives are just so cool! I’ve always wanted to try being one.”

“Yeah, I get that. Okay, I’ll play along. Let’s see... Then, I’ll solve this case faster than you can say—”

“Hey, wait a minute! *I’m* the detective here! You couldn’t even handle a proper shadow mission, so at least let me have my fun now!”

“What shadow mission?” Jin asked curiously.

Crap, he’s gonna find out we were tailing him the other day if we keep this up...

“I-I don’t have any idea what Roslia’s talking about either, but I do agree we should just let her have her fun. Don’t you?”

“Very good, Note! And so I shall be playing the role of the detective this time.” Roslia then cleared her throat and turned to Neme. “Now, Miss Neme, when did you first discover your pudding

was missing?"

"Just now! I opened the fridge to get the pudding I'd been saving, and it was gone!"

"If you've been saving it, that means you didn't eat it as soon as you got it, right? When did you buy it?" I asked curiously.

"Please don't get ahead of the detective in the investigation, Note," Roslia scolded me.

"Sorry. It's just a detective's nature to be curious about the details."

"What? You're not even... Augh, enough about playing detective! Roslia is trying to find my pudding!" Neme fumed.

She was probably mad about derailing this so-called investigation. If nothing else, her passion for pudding was the real deal—she really wanted to catch this thief.

"Neme bought the pudding four days ago! I always buy it at the start of the week and save it for the weekend so I have something to look forward to!"

"I see. So when do you think it disappeared?"

"Neme checks on it every night, and it was still there last night!"

"Was the pudding in that gold box in the center of the fridge?" Jin asked.

Neme immediately snapped, "Were you the one who ate it, then?!"

"No, I wasn't. But I did think the box was in the way."

Oh, *that* box. Yeah, I'd thought it was in the way too.

The Arrivers' refrigerator was the newest model, operating on magic energy. It was big and expensive, but any box smack in the middle of the thing would catch the eye of whoever opened it. I was pretty sure I had seen it yesterday too, so it had undoubtedly disappeared sometime today.

"Anyway, I don't think Jin's the culprit. He's just not that kind of guy," I confessed.

"Yeah, I completely agree," Roslia concurred.

"Same," Force echoed.

"Neme was the one who accused him, but I don't really think he was the culprit either," she added.

Jin's personality and usual behavior exonerated him of all guilt. He seemed a bit bewildered at our unanimous declaration of his innocence, however, and awkwardly scratched at his cheek.

"I'm glad you all feel that way, but shouldn't you suspect me at least *a little*? It wasn't me, but still..."

"Yeah, if anyone, I'd put my money on Force," I volunteered.

"Hey, rude! Don't go jumping to conclusions! That's how false accusations are made! I won't deny that I *would* have done it, but it

really wasn't me this time! Swear!"

"Forget Force. I think it's pretty suspicious that Erin's been so silent."

When Roslia said that, everyone turned to look at Erin. She hung her head low, hiding her face from all of us. Awkward silence hung over the table for a several long seconds before she finally muttered...

"I'm sorry... I was the one who ate it..."

"Erin! How could you?!" Neme demanded, pounding the table for answers.

Erin stood up and glared at Roslia, declaring, "You set me up!"

"Huh?" I couldn't help asking. "How?"

Erin explained, "She told me I could have the pudding in the fridge! So I ate it, but now it turns out it was Neme's!"

"Isn't that story a little too far-fetched...?"

I looked to Roslia. I honestly thought she'd deny it, but much to my surprise, she nodded in the affirmative.

"It's true. I told Erin she could have my spare pudding." There, she walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge door to pull out a red box from the top shelf. "But *this* is the pudding I was talking about."

On the side of the box were the words "for Erin" in small, handwritten letters. And inside the box was a single pudding far too tiny for the size of the container it was in.

"How was I supposed to know that?! You left it all the way in the back of the fridge! Anyone would take the first box they see!"

"But I even wrote your name on it, so isn't it your fault for not checking first?"

"That's true, but..." Erin trailed off, faltering under the stares of those around her. Eventually, she bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Neme. I ate your pudding by mistake."

"It wasn't on purpose, so Neme can't blame you too much. If you buy me a replacement pudding, I'll forgive you."

"Thank you, Neme..."

Relieved by how easily she was forgiven, Erin was almost tearful. Neme gently took her hands in a gesture of reassurance. It was honestly touching... even if it was all over some pudding.

"Then the mystery's been solved—it was all a misunderstanding made by careless Erin. Case closed!" Roslia declared in a high-pitched voice.

The next day, for some reason, I was standing in line in front of Frais de Mel Francois. Why, you ask? Because Erin said she couldn't stand in line for a fancy dessert shop alone and begged me to come along. I wanted to refuse, but her desperate plea moved me and I

ended up agreeing.

Visiting a fancy dessert shop was a mortifying experience for borderline introverts. As a fellow introvert, I totally understood why she didn't want to go by herself. Besides, going together wasn't so bad. It was almost like a date. I'd always daydreamed about waiting in line with a girl and chatting about nothing in particular to pass the time.

"This line really isn't moving, though..."

"The place must be super popular. We got here when the store opened, and there was already a huge line..."

I craned my neck to get a look at the front of the line, which continued into the store. The people all the way up there practically looked like ants from here. Just how long were we gonna have to wait to make it that far?

I looked around the area a bit more and spotted another dessert shop cater-cornered from our destination. Based on the banner outside, they were also selling pudding. The lack of a line suggested it wasn't as popular, but I watched as the occasional hopeless soul abandoned the queue in front of Frais de Mel Francois and wandered over there.

The quiet shop was probably just barely managing to get by off the business it generated from such customers. Perhaps they'd even started selling pudding after seeing how popular it was at Frais de Mel Francois. It made me question their pride as a business, but you also have to respect what it takes to cast aside your pride in the name of making a profit.

"Why don't we just get some pudding from over there? No one'll know the difference," I suggested, finally fed up with the endless line. "Not even Neme."

Erin replied with a glare, "That would be awful. I'd be betraying Neme after she was kind enough to forgive me."

"Who decided that the store with the long line is good while the store without a line isn't? Maybe that place has good pudding too, you know?"

"Good stores normally have long lines for a reason, obviously. Besides, Neme specifically asked for Frais de Mel Francois. So even if the other store has perfectly good pudding, it's not what she wants."

"Well, I suppose. But I am kinda curious about it now, so I might buy some just to try it later... I like to support the underdog, you know?"

"Because you're a weirdo... Though I do kind of get it."

We continued to watch the store across the road, and I realized something the next time a customer emerged with a red box in hand.

"Hey, isn't that the place Roslia got her pudding from?"

"So she tried to pawn second-rate pudding off on me, did she? She

could have at least gotten Fraîs de Mel François.”

“Who cares where it came from? You got free pudding...”

Granted, we were in this whole mess because of Roslia’s pudding. I could understand why Erin was none too pleased with her right now... But as I thought about it, another question came to my mind.

“Actually, why *did* Roslia give you pudding, Erin? I didn’t think you were close enough to buy desserts for each other.”

“I wondered that myself, but she said she only offered it to me because I was in the living room at the time. I did kind of think she’d poisoned it. That’s why I had you taste test it first.”

“You did?”

At her words, I recalled the exchange I had with Erin yesterday afternoon. If I remembered correctly, she’d asked me if I wanted to try her pudding and—

“Wait, that means I saw you eat it yesterday! There was never any need for detective work! I was right there at the scene of the crime! I even had a bite!”

“That makes you an accomplice.”

“Seriously?! And what’s this about taste testing for poison?! I feel like an idiot for thinking you were being nice!”

“I said that, but I ate it too, remember? So don’t worry. If we die, we’ll die together. We share the same fate.”

“Yeah, that’s a fate I’d like to avoid...”

We continued to chat away about everything and nothing. Before we knew it, we’d made it to the front of the line and into the store.

Erin leaned in to look at the fancy glass display case and mumbled, “It looks delicious...”

“What do you mean it *looks* delicious? Haven’t you tasted it?”

“You have too, you know. But did the one we had look like these? I ate it without knowing it was expensive pudding, so I wasn’t paying that much attention...”

“If Neme heard you say that, she’d be furious.”

“Are you saying *you* remember it perfectly?”

“It, uh... It may or may not have looked like these, yeah...”

I couldn’t answer her for certain. I wasn’t confident I could pick the pudding I ate yesterday out of a lineup...

“Then you’re just as guilty as me. But this is the pudding that Neme asked for. I wrote it down to make sure I’d get the right one and everything.”

Erin ordered a six-pack of the most popular, most orthodox pudding the store had—one for each of the Arrivers. This whole uproar had gotten everyone curious about Fraîs de Mel François’s pudding, though I couldn’t really criticize. That included me.

The clerk tucked the six puddings inside a large golden box and

handed it to us over the counter. We then left the store with the goods in hand, but the shop across the way happened to catch my eye again.

"I'm still curious about their pudding... Can we stop by there too?" I asked.

"Sure, but you'll have to buy it with your own money. I used everything I had at Frais de Mel Francois."

As an apology for causing the pudding commotion in the first place, Erin had personally footed the bill for all of us. With her blessing, I approached the less popular store. She politely waited outside for me with the golden Frais de Mel Francois box.

But when I stepped into the shop and saw the display case, I was hit with a shocking revelation.

What? What does this all mean...?

My head was spinning with questions and speculation. Somehow, I managed to take a deep breath and calm myself before taking another look.

I knew it... My gut never lies.

I reviewed the events of yesterday and today in my head. The discovery of the crime. Every party member's testimony. My thoughts about each one... And the curious feeling that something wasn't quite right. I weighed the information I could trust against stories with no evidence, how each Arriver had responded to the incident, and what the situation must have looked like from each of their perspectives.

When I did, the mystery unraveled and the fog shrouding the real story cleared. The pudding thievery that had seemed so simple at a glance was actually a complex plot of cunningly planned intrigue.

"I've got you now. Just you wait, pudding thief... I'll expose your crimes yet."

For the time being, I bought six puddings just like Erin and rushed outside.

"So, I've gathered you all here today for a very important reason: I have discovered the true culprit behind the pudding theft, and I shall now unmask them before you all!"

Just like last night, I gathered our party around the table in the living room.

"Why are you talking like that, Note?"

"Yeah, what's the deal? Didn't we figure out that it was Erin?"

"It just makes me sound more like a detective this way. Moreover, the case isn't actually closed yet."

"What do you mean?" Neme asked, her head quizzically cocked to the side.

Perhaps I should have given a more detailed answer.

"It's simple," I said. "Erin's innocent. She's not the one who ate

Miss Neme's pudding."

"Wait, but I did eat the pudding—" Erin started to object apologetically.

It was true that Erin had eaten *a* pudding, but that didn't contradict anything I was saying. At present, the only two people who knew the entire truth were me and the culprit themselves.

"I understand everyone's confusion, but I'll explain everything in due time, so please be patient." After cutting Erin off, I placed the two boxes of pudding we'd purchased upon the table. "This gold box is from *Frais de Mel Francois*, which we're all familiar with now. But this red one is from a store across the road that isn't as popular. We'll call the pudding contained within 'the expensive pudding' and 'the cheap pudding' respectively for simplicity's sake."

To be specific, the expensive pudding cost three times as much as the cheap one—but that wasn't material to the case right now.

"Four days ago, you purchased expensive pudding for yourself, did you not, Miss Neme?"

"Neme did, yes!"

"Then, Miss Neme, you stowed it in the fridge for safekeeping until the weekend. The culprit, however, got to it before you did."

"And... before I did?" Erin asked.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "I'm not sure of the exact time and date, but it was between one and three days ago. The real thief had done away with the pudding long before Erin did."

"Wait, then what did I eat?"

"Be patient. I'm going to explain that too. For now, let's assume the culprit ate Miss Neme's pudding on purpose. Perhaps they were hungry and wanted something sweet. Now, Erin, what would you normally do if you ate someone else's pudding?"

"Buy them more, duh. Neme would obviously be mad if her pudding just disappeared."

"I agree. Surely the culprit felt the same way. 'I ate the pudding, but it won't be a problem as long as I buy more before Neme finds out,' they probably thought. So they left the box in the fridge to make it *seem* like the pudding was still there while they went to get more. You said yesterday, Miss Neme, that you check the box every night, no? But that doesn't mean you check *inside* the box."

"Note's right. Neme didn't actually look inside."

"As I suspected. That means there's no proof the pudding disappeared yesterday. I'm even more certain of my theory now. Back to the topic—the culprit left the house to buy more pudding, but realized they'd made a fatal miscalculation when they arrived at the shop."

"A miscalculation?" Erin asked, cocking her head.

“They weren’t prepared for how long the line would be,” I explained. “The culprit only knew the store from the name written on the box, so they were unaware of its reputation. And, upon getting fed up with the ridiculously long line, they just so happened to spot another dessert shop across the road—the shop that sells the cheap pudding.”

For demonstration, I held up the red box for everyone to see.

“There’s never a line at the cheap store, so the fraudulent pudding was easy enough to obtain... Miss Neme, however, would never accept it in lieu of the real deal. The difference is too great and too obvious, and so the culprit came up with a devious plan.”

There, I opened the two boxes and removed all six puddings from each. I then picked up one of the cheap puddings and set it inside the gold box.

“They created a setup to make the cheap pudding *look* like the expensive pudding, then tucked it away in the fridge right where Miss Neme had left it.”

“Uh, but wouldn’t Neme still catch on when she went to eat it?”

“That’s exactly right, Force. She would. And the true culprit realized this too. That’s why they employed a third party to get rid of the evidence before that ever happened... someone who would never know the difference between cheap pudding and expensive pudding. A scapegoat, you could say.”

“And that was Erin...” Jin muttered.

My explanation up until this point was sufficient for him. He must have extrapolated the rest on his own, meaning he now knew the identity of the culprit too.

“Precisely. The culprit invited Erin to eat the pudding in the fridge, knowing full well that she would go for the gold box—the only one there at the time. A second cheap pudding was then placed in the red box and stashed away in the fridge as a dummy. The words ‘for Erin’ were even written on the side to give the impression Erin had mistakenly taken the wrong pudding.”

The true culprit ate the expensive pudding and replaced it with a cheap one, then had a third party eat the evidence of their crime and take the blame in the process. *That* was the true story.

And now that I’d spelled it out for everyone, I turned to the real culprit and declared, “The only one who could have done all this is the person who invited Erin to eat the pudding in the first place. In other words... it was you, Roslia!”

“Heh.” She smiled, then said, “An interesting theory, but where’s your proof?”

“That statement itself is like a confession... But the proof is in the message you wrote on the box—the only flaw in your otherwise

perfect plan. See, if you'd bought pudding for yourself, whose name would you write on the box? Yours, no? Erin said you just happened to offer her some because she was in the living room at the time, yet the box said 'for Erin.' Your intent to frame her was quite clear."

If Roslia needed a scapegoat, her first target would inevitably be Erin. She wasn't the kind of girl to give her pudding out of the kindness of her heart.

"That's circumstantial at best, don't you think? Like you said, you would normally write your own name on something that belonged to you, but to call me a criminal just for personalizing a little gift? That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it? Moreover, you don't have any evidence the puddings were switched. You'll never be able to prove it."

"Actually, I can... since I sampled the forbidden pudding myself!"

"Huh?"

"I'm saying I tried it. Erin was worried you poisoned it or something, so she gave me a bite—and it was definitely *not* the pudding we saw at Frais de Mel Francois."

That was ultimately how I'd discovered her trick. I wasn't sure when we were at Frais de Mel Francois, but when I saw it in the display case at the other store across the street... I knew in my heart that they had been switched. What Erin had given me yesterday was the cheap pudding, and I'd simply worked backward from there to figure out the rest.

Thinking back on it, I should've been suspicious the moment Roslia insisted on playing detective herself. She was pretty pushy about keeping me out of the investigation, and now it was clear why. It was all a ploy to keep us away from the truth. She'd even fussed at me for asking questions, like when Neme first bought the pudding. She was trying to keep me from uncovering her deception—a sign of a guilty conscience.

"What a crock. How was I supposed to know Note would taste test the pudding and discover it was the cheap stuff? I guess a girl can't plan for everything..."

That was as good as any confession. Roslia was giving up the ghost and admitting her crime. She leaned back in her chair with a smug look on her face.

Indeed, a series of coincidences had conspired to reveal her. I never would've tasted the cheap pudding if Erin hadn't forced me to, and I never would've known it was the cheap stuff if I hadn't gone into the second store. And without my involvement, Erin would've been in trouble.

Even if she'd tried the expensive pudding today and realized it wasn't what she'd eaten yesterday, no one would believe her after she was pegged as the main suspect. She'd just sound like she was trying

to avoid taking responsibility.

In other words, Roslia had almost planned the perfect crime. If it weren't for a series of unfortunate coincidences, she might have gotten away with it too. A simple case of mistaken pudding turned out to be a cunning inside job—a story of deceit and betrayal. All because of her. Roslia Minkgott was truly a terrifying woman, utterly deserving of her party-crushing infamy in Puriff.

“Teehee, I guess Note always sees right through me!”

“Why do you sound so happy? Shouldn't you be apologizing to Erin and Neme right now?”

“Yeah! You tried to pin the blame on me, you heartless fox!”

“That was Neme's precious pudding! You're the worst, Roslia!”

“But all's well that ends well, right? Now we have enough for all six of us.”

“I had to wait in line to buy that, you know?!”

Erin's furious shouting resounded above all the chaos, echoing throughout HQ.

Jin

Nickname

Black
Shadow

Gear

Dagger

Party

Arrivers



Role

Assassin

Skills

Shadow Runner

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Grants mastery of the art "Shadow Runner," which gives a momentary burst of speed.

Mineral Shapeshifting

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 2

Effect: The ability to manipulate the shape of mineral materials.

Arts

Stream

Evasive combat art. Avert an incoming attack to throw the enemy off balance. There are two variations: one that parries the incoming attack and one that bypasses it completely.

Sinking Walk

A running technique that involves leaning forward and accelerating with both one's arms and legs.

Phantom

Leaves an afterimage by accelerating its user at extreme speeds. A good fakeout.

Udon Kamono

3

III.
Hitomi Shizuki







Bonus Short Stories

Side Story Addendum

“Was what I did really that bad?”

“Yes. And premeditated to boot.”

A week had passed since the pudding incident, and Roslia and I were currently waiting in line at Frais de Mel Francois. Roslia’s heinous deeds—eating pudding that didn’t belong to her and then framing someone else for the crime—had caused all the commotion in the first place. So as punishment, she’d been sentenced to buying more pudding.

“Just remind me how I got dragged into coming along with you, Roslia...”

“Standing in line alone is boring. Besides, you did this with Erin last time. So now I’m counting on you to keep me company too.”

Why did it feel like I was always the one getting the short end of the stick? This made *two* days off I’d be wasting in line at this stupid shop.

“Erin was trying to make up for a mistake, whereas this is punishment you totally deserve. It’s completely different.”

“And yet you came along with me anyway. You don’t have to be so shy with your true feelings, you know?”

“I was just worried you’d try and pull some crafty pudding swap again. I’m here to keep you under supervision.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I wouldn’t dream of using the same trick twice.”

“That makes it sound like you had another trick in mind...”

She wasn’t repentant at all, was she? Granted, this was Roslia. I couldn’t imagine her being sorry for anything.

“I don’t plan on using such troublesome tricks anymore. I’ll use the straightforward method of charming the first man to come along into getting the pudding for me next time.”

“Yeah, I don’t see how that’s *not* a trick too...”

The fact that she considered that method “straightforward” was terrifying. Just how many men had she conned in her time?

“Why didn’t you just trick some guy into buying the pudding in the first place?” I suddenly wondered.

Roslia puffed up her cheeks and indignantly replied, “Excuse you! Do you take me for the kind of vixen who flirts her way into getting whatever she wants?”

“Uh, yeah. That about sums it up.”

“You’re horrible! How could you say that?!”

“I’d like to remind you of the conversation we were literally just having.”

She’d said point-blank that she’d rook some passerby into doing her bidding! I was *not* the villain in this scenario!

“I don’t want to flirt with just any man, you know. I don’t even want to talk to anyone besides you, Note. But you insisted I had to go buy pudding, so...”

“Why can’t you just wait in line like a normal person?!”

“I am.”

“Yeah, well, you should’ve done it by yourself...”

“You’re so mean, Note.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from the woman who used a fellow party member as a scapegoat.”

With a sigh, I looked toward the front of the line. Two more people just went inside the store, but the line had barely moved at all.

“But, you know, Note... waiting in line together like this kind of feels like a date. It’s fun,” she said, suddenly stepping closer and hugging my arm.

“What nonsense are you on about now—” I replied, stopping cold when I realized that was the exact thought I’d had while standing here with Erin last time.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she continued. “It is silly, isn’t it? Who would consider standing in line a date? How cringy can you—”

Not wanting to hear another word of her commentary on my inner thoughts, I swiftly interrupted her: “Actually, Roslia, I don’t think it’s so ridiculous after all. In fact, it’s starting to seem quite charming...”

“Why are you changing your tune all of a sudden?”

“Standing arm in arm with no other company but our own... Isn’t that the very essence of a date? In fact, standing in line together might be the ultimate date, don’t you think?”

“Definitely not!”

“Well, as you know, we call them dates after Count Date, who was once seen waiting in line with a girl—”

“Stop fabricating history. Who the heck is ‘Count Date’?”

“Huh? Never heard of him. Did you make that up just now, Roslia?”

“Hey, don’t try and foist your own nonsense on me just because you’re getting embarrassed now!”

“Then stop adding commentary to my inner thoughts... That’s even more embarrassing...”

“Don’t worry! I’ll be sure to regale Neme with tales of Count

Date.”

“Please don’t. Neme can’t tell fact from fiction, so she’d go around telling everyone about it.”

“Exactly!”

Roslia was, in all likelihood, being dead serious. Which was terrifying in itself. I’d have to keep my bad jokes in check around her in the future.

“Still, I didn’t think you’d be so insistent about comparing this to a date. Do you want to be on a date with me that badly? I’m thrilled, Note.”

Ah, so that’s what she thought I was implying. Well, whatever. I couldn’t deny I was having fun right now, and I didn’t see any reason to cast a raincloud over her sunny smile.

“Yeah, sure. Let’s just call this a date, then.”

“Yes, let’s!”

She hugged my arm tighter, and I could feel something soft pressing against me. To everyone else in line, we probably looked like any other stupid couple...

Such thoughts passed through my mind as I basked in the bliss of the moment.

The Day Before the Side Story

“Great timing, Note. Want a bite of pudding?”

I’d just returned to HQ and was taking off my shoes in the entryway when someone called out to me from down the corridor. It was Erin, our party’s mage, who was poking her head out of the living room and looking my way.

“Pudding? If you’re offering, then sure...”

It wasn’t like I had a soft spot for pudding, but I didn’t have any real reason to say no either. And so I followed her into the living room, where she showed me to a single cup of pudding sitting out on the large wooden table.

“You’re giving me this?” I asked.

“Just a bite,” she replied emphatically.

“What’s up? You don’t have to share if you don’t want to, you know? You can have the whole thing yourself.”

“But I want you to have a bite.”

“Seriously, what gives? Is there something wrong with the pudding?”

“It could be poison— No, nothing.”

“You said ‘poison’ just now, didn’t you?!”

“You misheard me.”

She insisted quite emphatically and I couldn’t think of any reason

she might want to poison me, so... I assumed I really had misheard her. The idea of poisoned pudding was kind of farfetched, anyway. So rather than look a gift horse in the mouth, I figured I should accept Erin's kindness for what it was in the form of a single bite of pudding.

"Well, thanks, I guess."

I picked up the spoon sitting next to the pudding and dug into the cream-colored dessert, scooping up one bite. Just as I was about to carry it to my mouth, however, Erin stopped me...

"Wait! I used that spoon already. I wanted to see if the pudding was edible, so I took a tiny bit and licked it."

"You wanted to see if it was edible? Were you worried it was expired or something?"

"It should be okay based on the date on the box it came in..."

"If you checked the box, then you don't need to worry. Now, do you not want me to use this spoon or something?"

"I'm just telling you so you know. I mean, in case that kind of thing bothers you. It'd be, like, an indirect kiss, so you can get a different spoon if you want. I don't care either way, so..."

"That's..."

I honestly wished she hadn't told me. I was hesitating now that I knew, but being fussy about it might make Erin think I didn't like her or something... I had to play my cards right, even if I was freaking out on the inside. Yeah, I had to be cool so she didn't think I was being weird about it or anything. Just act like it was no big deal...

"Doesn't bother me one bit," I declared. "I don't care at all about indirect kisses with you."

Man, that was a good one! I praised myself internally for keeping my composure, but Erin narrowed her eyes in displeasure.

"Saying you don't care at all kind of hurts my pride as a woman..." she whimpered, lowering her head dejectedly.

"W-Wait!" I backpedaled. "I was just putting on airs when I said that! If I'm being honest, I can hardly contain myself! I mean, I can't believe I get to use your spoon! I'm the luckiest guy in the world!"

"That's kind of creepy..."

Whoops. Did I overdo it? It was hard to find the right balance...

"Just shut up and eat it already, Note. Now I'm getting self-conscious about you using my spoon..."

"What? Well, if you insist—"

"Down the hatch! Gosh, this is so embarrassing..."

You're telling me! The awkwardness was getting to be too much to bear, so I closed my eyes and went to work as commanded. My indirect kiss with Erin tasted of sweet, sweet pudding.

"There. I ate it."

"Thanks, I can see that."

“Whatever...” I placed the spoon down on the table and stood up, offering my seat and the rest of the pudding to Erin. “She’s all yours now.”

“With the spoon you used?” she gawked.

“If that kind of thing bothers you. It’d be, like, an indirect kiss, so you can get a different spoon if you want. I don’t care either way.”

“How the tables have turned...” Erin gulped. “I don’t mind either. I don’t care about indirect kisses with you.”

“I’d prefer it if you cared a *little*.”

“Stop teasing me when you know I’m already embarrassed. I’m gonna eat it now...”

And with that, Erin scooped a spoonful of pudding with a perfectly straight face. I’d agonized over it, but sharing a spoon really didn’t seem to bother her. That wasn’t any fun... so I decided to up the ante.

“Since we’re both exchanging indirect kisses willingly, it’s kind of like sharing a real kiss, don’t you think?”

“A real kiss?!” she squeaked, her voice peaking into falsetto. Her hand froze halfway to her mouth, just like I’d hoped. “S-Stop saying weird things! You’re being a jerk! You’re just making it harder for me to eat this! Besides, aren’t you embarrassed to say something like that?!”

“Yeah, I’m guessing my cheeks are just as crimson as yours.”

It was a magnificent sight, if I do say so myself. Erin’s face was red all the way to her ears, and I probably didn’t look much different.

“Here I go! I’m doing it!”

“Thanks, I can see that.”

“Ugh!” Erin elbowed me before gulping down the pudding like it was nothing. She then turned to me. “There. I ate it.”

“Yup, I can see that too.”

“I know that, yet I still said it anyway...”

I knew that feeling. I’d reported my own pudding-eating to her just moments ago myself.

“Welp, good luck on the second bite, Erin!”

“We’re going through this for every bite?! The first one was so exhausting, eating this entire pudding might be the death of me...”

“I’m exhausted too. So how about you just eat it normally? Don’t worry about what I said.”

“Yeah, I think that would be best for both of us.”

We looked at each other and nodded in agreement. Who would’ve thought anyone could make such a big deal over pudding, of all things...?

Little did we know there would be another ordeal over the very same pudding the next day.

The First Guys' Night Out

It all started with a chance conversation I had with Force one day...

"You go out drinking with Jin sometimes, right, Force? What do you guys usually talk about?"

"Why don't you come along next time and find out for yourself?"

And now the three of us were here at the neighborhood pub about five minutes away from HQ for drinks. Our first guy's night out. For the record, I had no idea if the girls ever did anything like this. Considering their personalities, I figured not... Erin and Roslia didn't even like each other.

"Cheers!"

Following Jin's lead, Force and I raised our glasses before taking a big swig. After downing about a third of my beer, I decided to get the conversation going.

"So, what do the two of you normally talk about?" I asked.

"That's the ticket! With you here now, Note, we can finally put to bed the topic we've been debating for years! And that is..."

"Well?!"

Force stood up, fists passionately clenched. His enthusiasm drew me in too.

"What I have to do to get a girlfriend!"

"Okay, Jin, here's cash for my beer. I'm outta here."

"Hey, hey! Don't try and bug out before we've even gotten to the main discussion!"

"I can already tell you we're not going to get anywhere even if we do discuss it. Jin, is that really what you guys talk about?"

"Technically, yes. Although it tends to be mostly Force presenting his biased theories."

Wow. I was amazed Jin had the endurance to sit through that night after night. My introvert gauge was already three-quarters of the way to "I wanna go home."

"Okay, fellas, here's what I'm thinking," Force began. "I've been shooting blind in hopes of striking big on dumb luck. But I'm not seeing any results, so I'm gonna test out a new plan."

Shooting blind in hopes of getting lucky? That was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. I had half a mind to tell him that, but someone else's reaction caught me off guard...

"Sounds good," Jin piped up.

"You're on board with this?" I stammered.

"If the current methodology isn't yielding results, isn't it natural to try something else?"

"I mean, yeah, that's only logical. But that's not the problem here..."

“Just so you know, Note, Jin is the one who suggested the shooting blind strategy.”

“Wait, what?!”

I couldn’t hide my abject surprise at this news from Force. I looked at Jin in shock, but he simply nodded.

“A potential shortcut to success is increasing your number of attempts,” he explained.

And while that made sense, rationally speaking, it sure as heck didn’t apply to romance!

“Don’t you have any better advice than that?” I asked, still a little stunned. “Like narrowing down your options first or something?”

“While that would indeed be neater and more romantically ideal, if your goal is merely to find a lover, then I believe its best to put yourself out there as much as you can. There are people who won’t give you the time of day no matter how you approach them, but there are also those who don’t take much convincing.”

“Ha! Jin just basically said you think like a virgin, Note.”

“I don’t think that’s really what he said...”

I wasn’t gonna take that from another virgin. But anyway... Jin’s logical approach to love prioritized efficiency. I admit my take on it was decidedly more romantic. And then there was Force, who was simply impulsive and lusty. The three of us had entirely different perspectives, which was interesting in itself.

“So what’s the new plan you’re testing, Force?” Jin asked.

To this, Force cleared his throat and replied, “I’m thinking of lowering the bar. I’ve been talking up every cute girl I meet, but from now on, I’ll only go after the easy marks!”

“That could be good. Sometimes it’s important to adjust your standards.”

“You’re on board with this too, Jin...?”

What in the world? Force was off the rails as it was, but Jin’s efficiency-based approach only seemed to be spurring him further in the wrong direction.

I figured it’d be best for me to wrap this conversation up quickly—for the sake of Force and his love life. If he wanted real dating advice, he should go to... Crap. I couldn’t think of anyone. Neither Neme or Erin would know any better, and I didn’t even want to think about what Roslia would tell him.

“So, Force...” I had to ask. “What makes an easy mark, exactly?”

“A girl who’s not too cute and has never had a boyfriend before.”

“You are the absolute worst.”

I glanced at Jin, worried he’d be on board with this too. Fortunately, however, he shook his head this time. Yet as I sighed with relief, he said...

“Instead of a girl who’s never had a boyfriend, shouldn’t you be looking for girls who’ve had lots of boyfriends? I believe that would yield better odds.”

“Jin!”

How the hell did he reach that conclusion?! And here I thought we were actually about to get to some bona fide advice! Romance isn’t a game of probability, dude! Great, and now Force was nodding like he’d just heard the best idea ever...

“C’mon. Are there even any girls around who would date just anyone, regardless of their own standards?” I asked, hoping Force would see the light and give up on this plan.

Silence hung over the table for a time, but the three of us all reached the same conclusion in unison: “Roslia.”

“Okay, it’s decided! Time to commence Operation Get Back Together With Roslia!”

Force slammed his money on the table and flew out of the pub. I didn’t even have a chance to stop him.

“See? We really didn’t get anywhere with that discussion...” I sighed to Jin.

Force hitting on Roslia was nothing new. And I was sure nothing would change, even after tonight.

“Well, this is about how things usually go,” Jin replied.

That doesn’t make it okay...

And so, I discovered on my first guy’s night out that Force’s romantic marauding was at least partially Jin’s fault.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party:
Volume 3
by Udon Kamono

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